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ABSTRACT

The Central Regina Early Learning Centre is a community-based, early intervention program that aims to break the cycle of disadvantage for 3- and 4-year-olds in Regina, Canada. This report documents an evaluation of the program offered by the Centre from 1992 to 1994 and makes proposals for future program development. Chapter 1 of the report presents the program's historical background and philosophical underpinnings. Chapter 2 reviews relevant research and presents 10 criteria for preschool excellence. Chapter 3 describes the evaluation methodology, which is primarily participant observation. Chapter 4 gives an overview of program components: classroom, nutritional, transportation, and family outreach, health education/services, professional development, community outreach, staff social program, and fundraising. Chapters 5 through 7 present evaluation information on the classroom and parent outreach programs and discuss community support. The report concludes by noting that the mutually respectful relationship between children, staff, and parents is the pivot around which the curriculum successfully turns. Further, the family outreach program offers a support network to struggling parents within an attitude of compassion, understanding, and respect. The Centre's work with the community is an extension of its core values of mutuality and respect. The final chapter judges the Centre's program in terms of the standards presented in Chapter 1 and makes suggestions for future development. The report's eight appendices include a demographic profile of children attending the Centre,

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PROGRAM ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CENTRAL REGINA EARLY LEARNING CENTRE: FINAL REPORT

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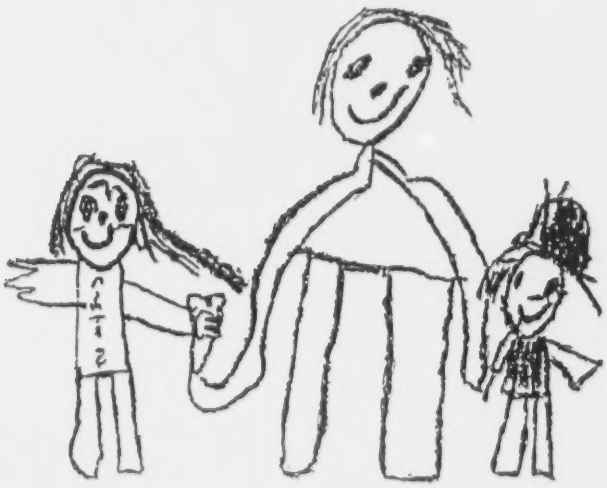

Priscilla McNab age 4 yrs.

SIDRU Research Report No. 17
March 1995

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With Funding from the
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by
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Research Assistants
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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

The Central Regina Early Learning Centre[1] is a community-based, early intervention program which aims to break the cycle of disadvantage for Regina children who live in poverty. For the past 17 years, the Centre has operated a preschool program for three- and four-year-old children who live in poverty.

Research demonstrates that children in poverty are at risk. They are more likely to have health problems, to drop out of school, and to come into conflict with the law (for example, Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 1991). Children who are First Nations and Metis face even greater risks. The Early Learning Centre offers a program aimed at meeting some of the immediate needs of these children and, more importantly, it aims to provide preschool children with the skills and confidence to succeed within the educational system and to increase their chances of escaping the cycle of poverty.

The goals of the Early Learning Centre have remained constant throughout its 17 years of operation: to equalize the educational opportunities of low-income children, and to work with parents towards this goal. As a result of these goals, the program involves two basic components: a developmentally appropriate, culturally sensitive, child-centred preschool program, and a set of programs aimed at involving parents.

In December 1991, after 14 years of operation, the Early Learning Centre approached the Muttart Foundation for funding for a "Program Development and Evaluation Project." The purpose of this project was:

> To legitimize the programs offered by the Early Learning Centre by evaluating current programs and curriculum and build upon the strengths of the present program by developing new and/or expanding present approaches.

This project was carried out from September 1992 until June 1994. The following report has been prepared as part of the project. The purpose of the report is both to document and evaluate the program offered by the Early Learning Centre and to describe some of the developments and changes which have taken place within the Centre as a result of the "Program Development and Evaluation Project." This report will finish by making proposals for the future development of the Early Learning Centre and for preschooling for low-income children.

HISTORY

There are many possible ways to approach a problem. In 1977, Anne Luke, a kindergarten teacher at an inner-city school, and a group of concerned parents saw the failure of low-income children in school as a problem they wished to address. Anne gained the support of these parents by conducting a door-to-door survey in a north-central Regina neighbourhood to see if there were any parents interested in developing a preschool program for their children. Parents were very interested. After enlisting the support of the local Catholic Archdiocese and Save the Children Canada, they opened the Early Learning Centre. At that point they did no formal research; they only had to look around them to see the unmet needs of their children to know that some type of program was necessary.

It was from this beginning as a small, grassroots community organization that the Early

---

1 While the official name of the organization is the Central Regina Early Learning Centre, throughout this report it will be referred to by its more commonly used name — the Early Learning Centre, or simply as the Centre.

Learning Centre has grown and developed. While it has grown in size (from 10 to 96 children) and in the number of staff and in the types of services it offers, it has, in a very real sense, remained true to its initial goals and philosophy. Over the years more than 1,300 children have experienced the nurturing and stimulating environment provided by the Early Learning Centre.

The Early Learning Centre opened in September 1977 on the main floor of a home at 1278 Elphinstone Street (north-central area of the city). Ten children attended on weekday mornings. Anne Luke was the only staff person. Parent volunteers shared janitorial duties, made classroom equipment, assisted in the classroom, carried out fundraising, and formulated and developed the policies of the new program. Anne recalls those early days:

> Mothers made equipment and we chatted and talked with them about what they wanted for their children. Also I could do incidental instruction about how children learn.

From the beginning, children were transported to and from the Centre. Initially, Anne drove the children in her own car. Parents who were interviewed continually emphasized the importance to the success of the program of providing transportation. Many parents felt they would have been unable to arrange for their children to get to school on a regular basis without transportation.

During the first year of operation, the Centre operated entirely on private funding. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Regina and Save the Children Canada were major donors. Save the Children Canada has continued to provide a yearly grant to the Centre and members of the local committee have remained staunch and active supporters of the Centre throughout the years.

When the Centre reopened after its first Christmas holiday, it had doubled its enrollment by adding an afternoon session. Word about the Early Learning Centre had spread and more parents were interested in having their children attend. The increase in size necessitated another staff person. During the fall, one parent in particular had been an active and dependable parent volunteer — Muriel Lerat. She became the Early Learning Centre's second staff person and first First Nations staff person. Muriel recalls her introduction to the Early Learning Centre:

> Anne came knocking. I didn't have any hopes for what the school would be. I volunteered — took it on. Children were around anyway. I was never nervous, it came naturally, [I was] already used to kids. There was a break [when Muriel was unable to volunteer] then [in February 1978] Anne took me on.

Anne and Muriel built what was to be a highly effective partnership, one which in many ways became the model for the present staffing policy. While Anne had a great deal of knowledge and experience in the area of early childhood education, Muriel had a practical and experiential knowledge of what it meant to be poor. Anne comments:

> I always checked everything against Muriel — I have a lot of respect for her. I'd consult her on issues. If there was an issue, I would go to Muriel and present it as a problem. What do you think should be done?

Over the next years there was a continuing growth in the Centre's enrollment as more and more parents requested programming for their children. In 1978, 24 children were enrolled. In 1979, the Centre moved to 2854 Dewdney Avenue, increased its enrollment to 30, and added a third staff person. In 1980, a second house — at 2835 Dewdney Avenue — was rented, the enrollment was doubled to 60, and staffing levels were increased. In 1984, the Centre moved to 3100 Dewdney Avenue — a larger, commercial building with a small house attached — and enrollment was increased to 84. In November 1990, the Centre moved to its present location at 2115 Athol Street, a former school building, and enrollment was increased to 96 students. The teaching staff was increased to its present level of four teachers and four associate teachers. Despite the continuing increase in size, the Early Learning Centre has never been able to meet

demand — there has always been a waiting list, which for several years has numbered between 150 and 200 children.

Obviously the changes in size meant increases in staffing levels and composition. Initially, Anne Luke was the only professional staff person with formal training. When Muriel Lerat joined the staff, she was trained "on the job" with the help of a Canada Manpower Training Grant. Since then, the Early Learning Centre has often used such grants to train new, non-professional workers, most of whom were parents, or were drawn from the low-income community at large. While some of the staff were paraprofessionals trained on the job, the Centre also began to hire individuals with education degrees or certificates.

With the 1984 move to 3100 Dewdney Avenue, Anne Luke felt compelled to assume full-time administrative duties; up to this point, she had split her time between the classroom and administrative duties. The board began to realize that, due to changes in size and in order to ensure a high-quality program for the children, they needed to develop a more comprehensive policy regarding staffing procedures and qualifications. As a result, the decision was made to move toward a staff partnership model: a professionally trained teacher would work with a paraprofessional teacher associate. Furthermore, each team should include at least one First Nations/Metis person in order to insure that children were exposed to positive role models. Over the years, this policy has remained in place and is enthusiastically supported by staff, board members and parents.

PHILOSOPHY

It is impossible to ignore the pivotal role Anne Luke, the founding staff person and current Executive Director, has played in the development of the Early Learning Centre. In 1976-77, Anne, a single parent with three young children, was a kindergarten teacher at Albert School. During this period, she became increasingly aware of the need to bridge the gap between the child and school. Specifically, she began to sense that a great gulf existed between the expectations of the teachers and the school system and the day-to-day realities of low-income children and parents.

The dissonance that Anne sensed was being articulated, in particular, by the First Nations and Metis communities. It was during this time that First Nations and Metis people were increasingly arguing that the educational system was not working for their children and that changes within the system and/or control of education by First Nations/Metis people should occur. Anne's own experience convinced her that not only First Nations/Metis children but all children living in poverty were at a disadvantage and were not being well served by the educational system. From the start, the major criterion for involvement in the program has been poverty, not race. While the majority of children have always been First Nations and Metis, the doors are open to any and all children who live in poverty.

In describing her initial way of approaching parents, Anne states that "mutuality and respect were always the philosophical underpinnings of what I did." She defines these terms as follows:

> *Mutuality* is a way to move away from hierarchical and unequal relationships. It is an attempt to work with people in partnership. To work in partnership with people who were marginalized within our society. When I met parents I would say "I've got some training but basically I can't do anything without your help and support."
>
> *Respect* means listening to what parents have to say and, in the broader sense, listening to what isn't said, learning to be in tune. Part of this is respecting culture and looking for the strengths within that culture. In this sense parents are seen as resource people... In practice respect means looking for ways to find a mesh between what parents want for their children and what I knew and felt was good early childhood practice. Respect also means appreciating that, in anything you do, you receive something back from the children and their families. ... Over the years I have

not had any reason to change this emphasis and have struggled to maintain that emphasis as the program has grown and changed.

As well as encapsulating the Early Learning Centre's operating philosophy, mutuality and respect are two ways in which the Early Learning Centre differs from the formal school system and many of our society's social service agencies. In a very real way, the Early Learning Centre has put into practice a concept of "empowerment." The Centre offers parents the chance to make decisions which are in their child's best interest — and when one lives in poverty there often do not seem to be many positive choices available. It offers a high-quality program, not a second-rate substitute. Furthermore, it builds upon parents' natural concern for and pride in their children. The Centre offers an opportunity for healthy growth and development. In Anne's words:

> The aim is not to fix kids. We don't mold them to take orders. We want to instill feelings of competency. The focus is not to make it easier for the schools but to make it easier for the kids.

Parents are viewed as partners and resource persons, not as poor people who do not adequately care for their children. It is assumed that parents care for their children and want the best for them. At the same time, the organization recognizes that poverty is an all-pervasive stress which may have profoundly negative effects on the lives of families, and attempts, wherever possible, to structure its program in order to be accessible to, accepting of, and helpful to these families. As a result, for the Centre, parent outreach includes a number of dimensions: parental involvement in and control of the overall operation of the program; an emphasis on encouraging parents to be aware of and involved directly in their children's education; programs aimed at developing and enhancing parenting skills; and programs which address some of the larger, poverty-related issues.

Although the program has never been exclusively designed for First Nations or Metis children, respect for Aboriginal cultures and an awareness of the negative impact of racism have always been built into the program. One of the simplest and yet most effective ways of respecting culture has been through the staff. First Nations and Metis teachers and drivers have provided children who attend the Centre with exposure to strong and positive role models. As well, the curriculum of the program has been created with respect for traditional First Nations and Metis culture: language, traditional customs, storytelling and traditional crafts are all included within the daily life of the classroom.

The mutuality and respect which are so important in dealing with parents are also a critical element in staff relationships. Anne Luke's relationship with Muriel Lerat was built on a partnership model, a recognition of the different strengths and skills of each. This partnership approach proved effective and was later formalized in the staffing policy. Over the years, this approach created a sense of community and a warmth within the organization. When Velma Collins, a women who worked with the Centre both as a volunteer and a staff person, was honored at the 1994 Annual Dinner, she commented on how the Early Learning Centre draws people: "Once you come and find out about the program, you get hooked both because of what the program is trying to do and because of the absolutely wonderful people." Other staff members are also aware of and comment upon this special atmosphere.

Those who work at the Early Learning Centre have a vision of the kind of world that they would like to live in, a world where people of different backgrounds are treated with respect and where the opinions of all are listened to and valued. Through their working relationships the staff want to create this ideal so that they can enjoy a good working atmosphere and model a harmonious world for the children and families involved in the program.

All fifteen people who work at the Centre believe in this vision. They share a central core of values and are committed to the well-being of the children. It is this shared set of values that

forms bonds tight enough to transform them from several individual "I's" into "we." In other words, those who work at the Early Learning Centre form a tight-knit community (see Sergiovanni, 1994 for a discussion of communities). That the staff believe strongly in the value of what they do is revealed through their behaviour but also through incidental discussions and comments. For example, one of the support staff made the following response following a comment of mine about the low rates of pay at the Centre:

> I have never heard anyone complain about their pay. What is really surprising though is that no one slacks off ... everyone works hard. I don't know what it is that makes it all work out. There is a special atmosphere that seems to make it all worthwhile ... I didn't feel good about my last job. I just did it. Here you give but you get something back ... it is so nice to go to the classrooms and see the children happy. I get such a good feeling when they see me and remember my name.

The happiness and well-being of the children is the uniting focus of the day-to-day activities of the Centre. This focus also helps the staff overcome and cope with major worries such as shortfalls in funding. As part of this program evaluation, the teaching staff developed their vision of the child and his/her potential. Like the preschools of Reggio Emilia in Italy, the staff of the Early Learning Centre have a vision of a strong, competent child, not a needy, deficit-filled young person (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 1993).

THE IMAGE OF THE CHILD

Although the Director and teachers at the Early Learning Centre do not consciously refer to their vision of the child, it is that vision that is one of the principal forces giving direction to all aspects of the program. Until recently they did not try to state this explicitly; however, it is evident in all discussions concerning children, parents and curriculum as well as in the daily interaction in the school.

When talking about how they see the children, the teachers use such metaphors as medicine bundles, delicate unfurling plants and hand-crafted earthenware pots. At birth, all children are given medicine bundles, and it is the individuals they chance to meet along the road who will determine the kind of protective medicine that goes into these bundles. A relationship with an interested, caring adult early in life can inoculate children and give them resilience to rise above the knocks life will surely throw at them. In a similar vein, the metaphors of the earthenware pots and the plant are developed: both are fragile and easily shattered, but with proper care, especially early in life, they will go on to survive many disasters. First the pot needs to be fired and glazed and the roots of the plant must be well established.

In spite of these colorful metaphors, the teachers do not have an abstract image of the child: they see each child with his/her personal history at school, interacting with other children and teachers. They also see the child within the context of his/her cultural and family background. Although the children are very young when they come to the Early Learning Centre, they have already lived three years and this background cannot be ignored. They are people who belong and are important members of their family and school. This sense of belonging and being an important part of the collective life of the school should be fostered.

Each child is also an important link in a cultural chain. Teachers believe that children should be proud of their cultural background and given opportunities to learn about it. If they are aware of their culture, they can go on to learn more as they grow up. Children are viewed very much as social beings and the teachers agree wholeheartedly with the dictum of the Reggio Emilia educators who say: "The baby is born as 'we' and it is only by living as 'we' that s/he becomes 'I'." In the case of the Early Learning Centre, the "we" that the child must live among, in order to find his/her personality, consists of the classroom, all aspects of the school including special events and time spent on the school buses, and the child's family and community. If the

gulf between any of these is too great it will be more difficult for the child to develop a sound, integrated personality.

It is the responsibility of the teachers to get to know each child. They see the children as competent, curious and unique individuals whose opinions must be taken seriously. As one teacher said, "They have active minds and must be constantly challenged, stretched and made to wonder." Here the teachers agree with Katz and Chard (1989) who find that all too often young children are "overestimated academically but underestimated intellectually" (p. 5). They also agree with Kohl (1994) who said, on a visit to the Cornwall Alternative School in Regina, that all children must be helped to find their way or their passion in life — that which they love to do.

Although the children come from low-income backgrounds, the teachers do not see them as deficient, or as individuals who must be "fixed up" to fit into the system. They believe strongly that the children themselves are not "at risk"; rather, their environments are "risk-filled." Poverty puts great strains on a family and community, and it greatly diminishes a child's opportunities in life. Despite these handicaps, each preschool child is a potentially powerful individual who can and should make a difference by creating or constructing his/her life and the life of the community. To what extent the children will be able to do this will be determined, in part, by the beliefs they have in themselves. Starting from the time of the children's first day at the Centre, the teachers see and treat them as people who walk through life respectfully and without shame: innovators who do not fear the outside world.

CHAPTER TWO:
REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

CHILDREN AT RISK: AN OVERVIEW

It has become common to refer to certain children as being "at risk." Despite the frequency with which this term is utilized, it is often not clearly defined. For the purposes of this report the "State of Regina's Children: A Statistical Profile" definition will be utilized:

> A risk factor was defined as a condition existing in a person's life that reduces his or her chances of reaching full human potential in society. (Geller et al., 1993, p. 3)

Obviously a wide range of factors, either individually or in combination, can contribute to placing a child "at-risk."

In order to more clearly understand risk factors, they can be divided into two general categories: bio-genetic factors or individual characteristics of the child, such as a disability or a health condition, and socio-environmental factors or factors external to the child, such as poverty or family violence. (Child at Risk Subcommittee, 1980, p.1)

Within the literature on "risk," poverty emerges as one of the most identifiable and all-encompassing risk factors. Several government committees have studied the pervasiveness of child poverty and its negative consequences for both individuals and society as a whole (Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 1991). The National Council on Welfare describes the impact of poverty upon children in particularly compelling terms:

> To be born poor is to face a greater likelihood of ill health — in infancy, in childhood and throughout your adult life. To be born poor is to face a lesser likelihood that you will finish high school, lesser still that you will attend university. To be born poor is to face a greater likelihood that you will be judged a delinquent in adolescence and, if so, a greater likelihood that you will be sent to a "correctional institution." To be born poor is to have the deck stacked against you at birth, to find life an uphill struggle ever after. To be born poor is unfair to kids. (Cited in Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 1991)

Poverty is viewed as a state of marginalization, a lack of access to much of what society offers. Poverty means powerlessness. The Laidlaw Foundation (1988) offers the following definition:

> Marginalized populations are defined as those excluded from access to the primary resources and opportunities of society. The term "risk" in this study means risk of inferior life quality and life chances. Conversely, marginalization implies the existence of "mainstream" or included groups who are relatively well positioned in society to secure opportunities and gain access to resources. Marginalization also assumes that there are basic opportunities and resources necessary for effective psychosocial functioning from which some have been excluded. (p. 3)

Flowing from this is the assumption that while poverty is often associated with a wide variety of social ills — alcohol and drug abuse, child neglect, criminal behaviour, family violence and family breakdown — poverty is the primary cause and many of these other problems are symptoms. Poverty is an all-pervasive stress which may have profound impacts upon individuals and families. The Early Learning Centre has always operated from this belief. When researchers chose to listen to people who live in poverty this is what they said:

> The overwhelming majority of those who participated in the inquiry [An Inquiry into Hunger in Regina] explained that poverty leads to hunger, and it is poverty and hunger combined which contribute to a complex set of problems that make it very hard for people to escape their desperate situation. Many participants shared with the board their understanding of the direct link between unemployment, poverty, poor quality housing and the problem of hunger. They said lack of knowledge about nutrition, ... a high degree of stress, lack of self-esteem and family violence all become part of the situation and in the end contributed to its persistence. But these

> are compounding factors rather than the cause of hunger. Poverty is the beginning point, and poverty, they explained is associated with low levels of education, unemployment, unequal access to opportunities and inadequate support from the community around them. (The Mayor's Board of Inquiry, 1989)

While poverty has a profoundly negative impact on the lives of its victims, it also has a social cost — a loss of human potential that is impossible to calculate. However, the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (1991) attempted to calculate some of the economic costs of unemployment and lack of education. They concluded that, over the next 20 years, if we could keep poor children in school:

> Incomes (used as a rough measure of the contribution of Canada's total output) would be $23 billion higher... Federal and provincial income taxes would rise by $7.2 billion and consumption taxes by $1.15 billion. UI contributions would increase by $220 million and benefits fall by $660 million. Social assistance payments would be down by $710 million. (p. 73)

Figures published last year show that this waste of human potential is still a reality because "the high school drop-out rate for children from poor families [is] 2.5 times that for children from nonpoor families" (Ross, Shillington and Lockhead, 1994, p. 1).

Shillington and his co-authors go on to list other strongly negative statistics for children living in poverty in Canada and conclude:

> What this catalogue of misfortune makes clear is that children who grow up in low-income families stand out in a variety of ways from their better-off peers. They are less healthy, have less access to skill-building activities, have more destructive habits and behaviours, live more stressful lives and are subject to more humiliation. In short, they have less stable and less secure existences and as a result are likely to be less secure as adults. (Ibid., p. 2)

From the start, children from poor families are not given a chance to operate on a level playing field. Poor families suffer the effects of continual deprivation: "a relentless feeling of being boxed in; a feeling that life is dictated by the requirements simply of surviving each day" (ibid., p. 3). They tend to live for the moment with little hope for the future.

It is hard to make choices when there are so few options available; hard to make long-term plans for your children's futures when you had none for yourself. Furthermore, life is extremely difficult for parents who must struggle to find enough food for their children and continuously attempt to keep them out of trouble on the neighbourhood streets. The long-term negative effects and burden of suffering that living in poverty imposes on a sizable section of society, often enduring across generations, is sometimes referred to as the "cycle of poverty."

It has been suggested that a two-tiered approach is required to break the cycle of poverty (Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 1991). Programs must address both the need to redistribute income and resources and the provision of services. To date, high-quality preschooling seems to be one of the most effective service programs for helping children ease out of the cycle of poverty. The hope of preschooling will be the topic of subsequent sections in this chapter, but first it is necessary to examine the especially heavy burden of poverty borne by First Nations and Metis people.

POVERTY AMONGST CANADA'S FIRST NATIONS AND METIS PEOPLES

It is impossible to discuss poverty in this country without recognizing that Canada's First Nations represent one of the most marginalized groups in our society. According to the Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology (1991, pp. 5, 7, 10), 51% of all Native children are living in poverty, while current estimates suggest 16% of Canadian children and

22.6% of Saskatchewan children live in poverty. Furthermore, according to the 1986 census, approximately 85% of all Aboriginal families had incomes below $10,000.[2]

The current marginalization of Canada's Native population should be understood as the result of the forces of colonialism. Native peoples have been subjected to both structural and cultural colonialism: they have experienced economic impoverishment and severe damage to their traditional culture. First Nations and Metis spokespersons observe that the current levels of poverty, and social problems like alcoholism, family violence, sexual abuse, poor school performance and poor parenting skills, are logical outcomes of the history of colonialism. This point was highlighted in a national study on Aboriginal child care (Jette, 1994).

First Nations and Metis peoples have grave concerns about the loss of cultural values, and they feel that the subsequent destruction of self-esteem is contributing to drug and alcohol abuse, family breakdown, violence and crime. Adults feel that their culture is slipping away from them and could be lost to their children. Yet they realize that in order for their children to be successful in contemporary society, they must be proud of their heritage. Parents, therefore, have a strong desire to keep their culture and heritage alive in their children (Jette, 1994). This desire was continually emphasized by parents throughout the evaluation process. In a questionnaire distributed at a "gathering" of present and former parents of children from the Early Learning Centre, creating an awareness of and pride in culture was listed as an essential feature of the preschool programming by the vast majority of respondents.

It is clear that Canadians from First Nations and Metis backgrounds bear a heavy burden. They have to cope with a triple dose of marginalization: 1) they are one of the poorest groups in Canada; 2) they are in danger of losing completely their culture and its protective factors; and 3) they are subjected to various kinds of racism. Certainly it is because of factors such as these that many of the individuals with whom I spoke during this project talked of taking on a sense of individual and communal shame which is very difficult to shake off. Like other parents forced to bring up their children in poverty, First Nations and Metis peoples see suitable preschooling as one of the best hopes for their children.

THE BENEFITS OF PRESCHOOLING

> For some students, education represents the first rung on the ladder of success; for others, it represents in insurmountable obstacle unfairly condemning them to a life they would rather avoid. Some see schools as forums to display their accomplishments, to acquire cherished rewards, or to develop otherwise ignored abilities. Others see schools as hostile, unaccepting, alien, punitive, and threatening environments that are constantly making senseless demands and passing unfair and insensitive judgments. [For these students], schooling is an irrelevant experience to be passively endured, then quickly forgotten when they finally and thankfully enter the real world. (Pomfret, 1982, p. 261)

Children born into poor homes, and those whose parents dropped out of school, are more likely to experience school as a type of endurance test than as a journey of learning which leads to a rewarding life. Many children of poverty are not equipped to meet the expectations of school. That "all children in America will start school ready to learn" was the first goal of George Bush's National Education Strategy to move the United States towards full literacy by the year 2000 (Cited in Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 1991). Preschooling

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2 Survey information adjusted to 1994 costs shows that for an average poor urban family of four (two adults and two children), the annual income is approximately $21,000. (Ross et al., 1994)

with parental participation was a key element of this strategy. The present Clinton administration has continued to recommend this approach as part of its social policy platform.

Since the 1960s, great faith has been put in preschooling as a means of equipping children from so-called disadvantaged backgrounds for school. In 1964, the Johnson administration in the United States initiated the Head Start Program, a compensatory, early-intervention preschool program, as part of its "War on Poverty."

Although the early results of the follow-up studies on the Head Start initiatives were disappointing, solid evidence is now available to attest to the value of preschools and their cost-effectiveness. For reasons of space and because many extensive literature reviews of preschooling are available (e.g., Zigler and Valentine, 1979; Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, 1983; Woodhead, 1988; *Better Beginnings: Better Futures*, 1990) only a few key studies will be discussed below.

Among studies on the effects of early intervention programs, the Perry Preschool Project stands out for both longevity and boldness of design. Although based on a relatively small sample, the results of this comparative research project clearly demonstrate the benefits of high-quality preschooling for low-income children. This longitudinal study assesses whether high-quality, active learning programs can provide both short-term and long-term benefits to children at risk of failing in school.

Beginning in the 1960s, a team of researchers — among them David Weikart, a former school psychologist who started the Perry Preschool Project — has followed a group of preschoolers into adulthood, and compared them to a control group who had no special program (Schweinhart et al., 1980, 1981, 1983, 1993). The most recent results compare the study participants at age 27 and unequivocally demonstrate the benefits of high-quality preschooling for a group of low-income children, many of whom lacked the type of early educational experiences which seem to be necessary for success in school. The long-term benefits of high-quality preschool programming include:

- higher rates of high school completion
- higher employment rates and better income levels
- less dependence on social assistance
- lower teenage pregnancy rates
- lower rates of criminal activity

Programs like the Perry Preschool Project not only enhance the quality of life of the young children and their families, but are also a wise investment of public money. The most recent cost-benefit analysis to age 27 (Schweinhart et al., 1993, 143 ff.) shows that the preschool program was a sound investment because *"Over the lifetime of the participants, the preschool program returns to the public an estimated $7.16 for every dollar invested"* (ibid., p. xviii, emphasis in text). This estimate is adjusted for inflation and includes all hidden costs such as the rent of school buildings and administrative support from the school board central office.

Preschooling and the Prevention of Youth Crime

Although early childhood intervention programs were specifically designed to improve school performance, "longitudinal studies are beginning to suggest that they may have an impact on future delinquency and criminality rates" (Zigler et al., 1992, p. 997). The studies (including the Perry Preschool study) show that preschool graduates achieve lasting success into adulthood, especially in the area of social competence. Zigler and his co-authors believe this is so because preschool programs are broadly based and include the family whereas programs aimed at preventing delinquency are generally more narrowly focussed. Involvement of the parents in the

program may help to establish a more supportive home environment and more effective home-school linkages.

When discussing the significantly lower levels of criminal activity among the adolescents and young adults (until age 27) who attended a preschool, Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikhart (1993) posit the following explanation of how preschooling seems to "inoculate" children against deviance: high-quality preschooling leads to improved intellectual functioning, which leads to school success. In turn, the child enjoys school and has a greater expectation of success in life. Parents and teachers also begin to have heightened expectations — there is a multiplier effect at work and thus the motivation to succeed grows. These authors argue that the result is the creation of bonds between the young person and the school. It is the strength of these bonds that keeps young people engaged in school and away from delinquency.

Preschooling and Improved Mental Health

Generally, the links between preschooling and the long-term well-being and mental health of the child are apparent, though not well understood. No doubt, the increase in intellectual functioning is certainly an important factor in the causal chain. But as Woodhead (1988) argues, its impact is probably resonated through a complex and interrelated set of experiences (including attitudes, expectations and behaviours) which happen over several years involving the child, the school, the family and the community. This intricate set of interrelationships builds both an internal and an external set of supports for the young person — a buffer against the blows of life — which foster a sense of social competence and self-esteem. In other words, preschooling seems to build resilience.

Preschooling in Canada

Efforts to set up supportive preschool programs in Canada have not been as systematic or as well publicized as in the United States. However, one Canadian program which is well known in the early intervention literature is the Laboratory Pre-school which was set up at the University of Western Ontario (Wright, 1983). This program was play-oriented and activity-based, with an emphasis on cognitive development and individualization. The findings indicated that during the study, low-income children gained comparatively more than high-income children from attending the cognitively oriented program for two years; the follow-up study showed that the low-income group made greater IQ gains in kindergarten than a comparative group who had had no preschool experience. These children probably made gains in other areas such as social competence; however, because of the subjective nature of the measures used, these were harder to quantify (Wright, 1983).

The findings of one study attests to the benefits gained from attending the Early Learning Centre: Low (1986) investigated the academic achievement and sense of self-worth of its former students then attending primary grades. A group of 50 First Nations and Metis children who had attended the Centre was compared to a matched group of 50 students who had not attended. Altogether Low investigated five hypotheses and her overall conclusion was: "Indian/Native students who had attended the Centre had experienced greater success in school and held more positive feelings of self-worth than was true of Indian/Native students who had not had Centre experience" (p. iv). More specifically, she found that students who attended the Early Learning Centre were more likely to adjust satisfactorily to school and to have positive feelings of self-worth and were less likely to be retained in grade. In addition, parents interviewed during the study believed that their child's experience at the Centre helped later in school; many spontaneously added that they wished that all of their children had been given the opportunity to attend the preschool. Although only First Nations and Metis children who had attended for at least five months participated in the study, it is likely that the same results

would be found amongst other children who had attended the program. It is also likely that if all children had attended for longer (the desirable term would be two years), they would have gained more from the experience. Nevertheless, these results are very encouraging, especially since they were obtained at a time when the Centre was not as well established as it is today. For instance, at the time, fewer of the "teachers" were formally trained.

Overall, there is a dearth of Canadian research on all aspects of preschooling. However, some of the projects at present being sponsored by the Ontario government's *Better Beginnings: Better Futures* (1990) initiative include research into the early prevention of emotional and behavioural problems through preschool initiatives. Interim results from this research should be available shortly.

Two of these Ontario projects involve culturally appropriate preschools for First Nations children on reserves. Findings from these studies will be welcome indeed as there is practically no information for First Nations communities interested in setting up programs suitable for their children. The situation is even more dismal for First Nations and Metis people living "off reserve." Over a three-year period, Debbie Jette, the Chief Commissioner of the National Commission on Aboriginal Child Care, carried out a study to examine the child-care needs of more than 700,000 people living in 64 different urban communities across Canada. The Commission's study found very little in the way of suitable programs or materials — this was true in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal owned and operated child care facilities. There appears to be no culturally appropriate programming or curriculum materials to help First Nations and Metis preschoolers become proud of, and familiar with, their heritage. This is a shameful national lack of resources that urgently needs to be filled.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

All reviews of research on preschooling stress the need to emphasize the importance of providing quality programs if these programs are to be effective in changing children's lives. Based on these reviews of longitudinal studies of a variety of early childhood programs serving all kinds of families, Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikhart (1993) make the following generalizations about effective programs for preschool children and their families:

- Effective programs use explicitly stated, developmentally appropriate active-learning curricula that support children's self-initiated learning activities and boost self-esteem.
- Effective teaching staff have been trained in early childhood education and do not change jobs often.
- Effective administrators provide systematic inservice training on site and supervisory support for their staff's curriculum implementation.
- Effective programs maintain classes of fewer than 20, three-to-five-year-olds for every pair of teaching adults.
- In effective programs, staff treat parents as partners and engage in extensive outreach to parents, such as home visits at least monthly, to learn from parents and to help them understand the curriculum and their children's development. (p. 17)

Other groups and authors who have carried out reviews of preschool programs have also come up with criteria. For example, the authors of *Better Beginnings: Better Futures* produced a similar but more detailed set of criteria which "highlighted salient elements of effective programs ... for children in economically disadvantaged communities" (p. 59). They organized these program traits under three headings — program design, components and implementation — which are listed in full in Appendix 2. (The Government of Saskatchewan has also developed a set of criteria, Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children, 1994.)

Information from the three sets of criteria referred to above have been used, along with my

knowledge of research and experience in preschooling, to develop a set of criteria or standards against which to judge the program and performance of the Early Learning Centre. These criteria have been adapted to more realistically fit the structure and circumstances of the Centre's program — for instance, some of the criteria from the *Better Beginnings: Better Futures* presume a multiagency support system for families and are beyond the resources of this program. Since these criteria of excellence are tailored to meet the needs of low-income families, they should be useful in planning similar early-intervention programs. The ten criteria of excellence are listed below.

All these sets of criteria underline some of the essential characteristics of effective curricula, staff and administration, and fall within the criteria for the accreditation of programs laid out by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (National Association of Young Children [NAEYC], 1984). These criteria are also embraced under the umbrella of "developmentally appropriate practice" (Bredekamp, 1987). However, as Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikhart (1993, p. 17) point out:

> Popular understanding of what is *developmentally appropriate* [emphasis in text] does not always measure up to the definition articulated by the NAEYC. The challenge is to systemize developmentally appropriate practices so that diverse teaching staff can readily comprehend and implement them... Developmentally appropriate practices must be widely understood ... and to use a Piagetian term, this understanding must be *operative* — capable of being put into practice.

In this program evaluation, I hope to tell the story of an early childhood program that operationalizes the principles of appropriate practice, and through the dissemination of this report to inform other communities, professionals and concerned individuals who can learn from the successes of the Early Learning Centre. Like the story of the Perry Preschool, this is a preschool program that is special in many ways and needs to become known in the research literature.

TEN CRITERIA FOR EXCELLENCE IN PRESCHOOLING

- *Explicit, developmentally appropriate, child-centred curriculum:* Effective programs use explicitly stated, developmentally appropriate, active-learning curricula that support children's independence, self-esteem, problem solving, attention, choice and language development.
- *Well-trained and stable staff:* Effective teaching staff have been trained, and have a special interest, in early childhood education, and do not change jobs often.
- *Vigilant but supportive administrators:* Effective administrators provide support, encouragement and supervision for their staff's curriculum supervision; they also consult with staff and provide on-site in-service.
- *Low child-teacher ratio:* Effective programs maintain classes of fewer than 20, three-to-five-year-olds for every pair of adults. (A lower ratio is desirable.)
- *Minimum of a year's duration:* Effective programs are available to children for at least one year but preferably for two years.
- *Parents as partners, home visitation and communication:* In effective programs, staff treat parents as partners and engage in outreach such as home visits at least once a semester to learn from parents, to support them and to help them understand the curriculum and their child's development.
- *Growth in parent competence, involvement and confidence:* In effective programs, parents gain competence by becoming more actively involved in their children's education at home and in school. They grow in confidence and gain greater control over their lives as they learn new skills either directly or indirectly by observing the teachers.

- *Relaxed but encouraging attitude towards parent involvement:* In effective programs, parental and family involvement is encouraged by creating an atmosphere where they feel comfortable, establishing personal relationships with parents and guardians by offering a variety of options for involvement. Although highly encouraged, involvement is not required.
- *Holistic, culturally sensitive and cooperative:* Effective programs take an holistic view of the child within the family, community and culture. Because of this, these programs are sensitive to the children's culture and the framework of meaning learnt at home and also work with other groups and agencies in the community to support the whole family.
- *Flexible, self-evaluating and adjusting:* Effective programs are flexible, open to change, and constantly self-evaluating and adjusting to meet the changing needs of children, families and the community.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this brief sketch of selected literature, I have highlighted some of the realities of a life of poverty; I have also made special reference to the plight of First Nations and Metis peoples. The research results on the effectiveness of high-quality preschooling are extremely encouraging and seem to offer real hope to many poor children and families. Responsive preschool programs can help them feel less boxed in and marginalized. Increased parental expectations certainly have a role to play in building this success along with the school. All in all, preschools can help children take their first tentative steps on the way to breaking the grip of the poverty cycle.

Finally, I presented three research-based sets of criteria to judge the characteristics of effective preschools. By synthesizing the information from these criteria, I developed the "Ten Criteria of Excellence" which will be used to evaluate the Early Learning Centre. Before discussing the Centre's program, I will discuss my research methods in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

BACKGROUND

In 1992 the Executive Director of the Early Learning Centre, working with a sub-committee, applied to the Muttart Foundation to fund two research projects. The first was a follow-up study of the preschool graduates in order to determine what effects the program had on children's later academic progress and social development. The Muttart Foundation chose not to fund this project; it did, however, fund the second project: the present Program Evaluation and Development Project. The initial objectives of this project were: to evaluate the present preschool program including the family outreach program; and to work directly with the staff in the development and implementation of an improved program. However, once this evaluation project was underway it was possible to include some elements of the follow-up study of the preschool graduates. Hence, a third objective was added: to determine what effects the program has on the academic and social development of the preschool graduates in the long term.

The decision by the Muttart Foundation to fund the Program Evaluation and Development Project rather than the follow-up study was based in part on the assumption that more valuable information could be gained by asking *how* and *why* the Early Learning Centre operated, rather than by focussing on *what* the results of the program were. As Feuerstein (1986) argues, "Knowing why a program succeeds or fails is even more important than knowing it does" (p. 7). In addition, it was argued that Low (1986) had already carried out a follow-up study of the graduates of the Centre.

Although it was understood that the information and research gathered throughout the project would be made available to the public, it is hoped that this document will provide information which will be interesting and useful to individuals and groups throughout Saskatchewan and Western Canada.

PREPARATION FOR CARRYING OUT THE RESEARCH

Because of financial assistance from the Muttart Foundation, in the first year of the project I was able to arrange some release time from my teaching duties at the Faculty of Education, University of Regina. For the second year of the project I was on sabbatical leave.

In preparation for carrying out this research, and because I am a University Faculty member, I had to get clearance from the University of Regina Ethics Committee. Following this, I got permission from the Centre's staff and parents. The parents were informed of the program evaluation in a newsletter and they then signed a consent form. I also got permission from both Regina School Boards to visit the schools to interview teachers and past students of the Early Learning Centre.

One of my first duties as principal researcher was to advertise for, interview and hire a First Nations research assistant who would interview past and present parents and become involved in developing the family outreach program. This research assistant worked for one year. In the second year, I had another part-time assistant who helped compile and analyze some data, carry out some library research, and oversee the evaluation project during a two-month absence on my part.

At various times during the two-year project, three senior undergraduate students also assisted me in the collection of observational data in the classrooms and in implementing a program initiative which developed as a result of this evaluation project. In the following section, the research methods used by me and my assistants will be spelled out.

RESEARCH METHODS

One of the principal methods employed was participant observation. In general, qualitative methods such as interviewing, observing and reviewing of archival documents were used. Naturalistic approaches such as these are grounded in the experience of the community being studied and are supported in the literature. As Taylor and Bogdan (1984) state, "The term qualitative methodology refers in its broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data: people's own written or spoken words and observable behavior" (p. 5). The use of this methodology leads to a vivid description of the phenomena studied and an interpretation of events from the perspective of the participants.

The approach was well suited to the project for a variety of reasons: one of the Early Learning Centre's staff commented that she found the research methods used were "very respectful." Before the project got underway, many of the staff expressed their initial reservations about having an outsider evaluating their project. However, because of the unobtrusive participatory techniques, my assistants and I came to be considered as simply other staff members. The length of time that I spent at the Centre also helped me to fit into the community there. All of this lent validity to the research in the eyes of the principal participants.

After spending one week of observation at the Centre, I realized that the best way to categorize the overall focus and intent of the research methodology was as participatory action research. Within the literature, participatory action research is described as a "combination of education, research and action" (Cassara, 1987; Maguire, 1987; Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991; Western Institute for Public Policy, 1993). From the Early Learning Centre's perspective this approach was appealing because of the action component. While traditional research generally separated the collection of knowledge from the application of that knowledge, participatory research assumes that the research process is more effective when a dynamic process of defining issues of concern, collecting information, considering possible solutions, trying out new actions and evaluating the effect of those actions is followed. Kemmis and McTaggert (1988) refer to this process as the action research spiral. As a result, the Early Learning Centre would end up not just with a piece of research about their program but would have taken action to improve upon the quality of the program. According to the staff's own account, this research project involving "mutuality and respect" generated much intellectual excitement and speculation.

IMPACT OF THE PROGRAM EVALUATION

Now that the active participation phase of the project has ended, several of the staff have said that they miss me being around, bringing new ideas and asking questions. In general, the staff seemed to find the two years of the program evaluation interesting. Overall, carrying out an evaluation appears to have had at least four outcomes which have had an impact on the program and working conditions at the Early Learning Centre:

- Having a program evaluation generated a substantial amount of intellectual excitement which the staff found very stimulating. Because there were outsiders with different ideas around, they were able to use the new people as a catalyst for their own intellectual quest. Staff began to reflect upon and question their own practices and ask questions about their curriculum content and its organization. For example, they began to question the need to organize all content around themes and the need to have children line up to go to the washroom and eat their snacks at the same time. By their own admission, the program evaluation provided an opportunity for professional renewal.
- The program evaluation also had an impact in helping the Centre's staff become even more focussed in what they do. For instance, the Director and staff began to examine aspects of the program's goals and policy. Some were changed to reflect more accurately what happens at the Centre. In addition to actually acquiring a greater focus, both the Director and staff became

more articulate in stating what they did and explaining *why* they did it in that particular way. All in all, over the two years, I could see the staff becoming more confident about their program and curriculum.

- One of the salient characteristics of the Early Learning Centre's program over the years has been the ability of those working there to modify it to suit new situations and to incorporate new ideas to improve the services offered to children and their families. The project gave an impetus to this process of on-going program evaluation, all the more so because the project was designed as a participatory action research model. This provided a structure for changes to be proposed, as well as supplying an outside catalyst; as a researcher, I brought aspects of the program to the staff's attention. I also introduced some new techniques and equipment, such as a video camera, and gave and organized workshops in areas where the teaching staff felt they needed more knowledge in order to make improvements.
- The final impact of the program evaluation is closely related to the previous point and concerns the actual implementation of the proposed program refinements or changes. Ideas for change were generated because a research structure existed. This structure also helped in the actual implementation of the program initiatives. As the researcher, I did not do anything directly to make the changes. The fact that I was there, and that the project was taking place, seemed to motivate people to implement changes as soon as possible. The staff seemed to welcome the evaluation as a type of self-imposed deadline for action. Several months later the impact of the evaluation project is still being felt and changes started during the project's active phase are still being refined and implemented, for example, the parents' resource room and the role and duties of the lead teacher.

INTERIM REPORTS AND THE MUTTART ADVISORY COMMITTEE

As part of the agreement between me, as Program Co-ordinator/Principal Researcher, and the Early Learning Centre, I agreed to submit a progress report to the Executive Director at the end of every three months. The Director then sent each of these interim reports to the Muttart Foundation to demonstrate that the grant money was indeed being spent on the Program Evaluation and Development Project. Submitting this quarterly progress report was part of the agreement between the Muttart Foundation and the Early Learning Centre. (Copies of interim reports are included in Appendix 3.)

Copies of these reports were also sent to the members of the Muttart Advisory Committee. When the Executive Director decided to apply for a grant from the Muttart Foundation, she formed a committee to help write the grant proposal and oversee the Program Evaluation and Development Project. Throughout the project, I met with this committee to inform them of my progress. While my relationship with this committee was a nonthreatening one, meeting with its seven members was nevertheless a constant check on the reliability of my data collection. Submitting the interim reports to the Muttart Foundation acted as a similar check on reliability.

STRUCTURE OF THE REMAINDER OF THE REPORT

The remainder of this report will consist of five chapters. In the next four, data and discussion of different aspects of the Early Learning Centre's program will be presented. First, an overview of the entire program will be given in Chapter Four; specific components of the program will be presented in more detail, as well as some of the outstanding program features, such as the atmosphere and the administrative style.

Chapters Five and Six respectively will include information on two major program components: the classroom and the parent outreach programs. To round off the data presentation, Chapter Seven will present a discussion on the place of the Early Learning Centre within the community, and discuss community support for the program.

Even though the "Ten Criteria of Excellence in Preschooling" will be referred to throughout the report, in Chapter Eight these will be revisited and the Centre's program will be judged in terms of these standards. It is here, also, that notions about high-quality, supportive preschooling will be crystalized, and from the analysis suggestions for future directions — for preschooling in general and for the Early Learning Centre in particular — will be made.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE PROGRAM OFFERED BY THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

In this section, I will first give an overview of the entire program offered by the Early Learning Centre, and then outline its organizational structure. Following this brief introduction, I will describe and discuss various aspects of the program. In the course of these descriptions and analyses, certain traits of the Centre's overall philosophy and *modus operandi* will become obvious. These defining characteristics will then be compared to the "Ten Criteria of Excellence in Preschooling" in the conclusion to this section.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAMS OFFERED BY THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

While each aspect of the program is important in itself, the classroom program nevertheless could be considered as the core element. Because of this, and because the focus of the Centre is educational, the classroom program will be placed first in the account of the entire program. I must stress, however, that any individual or organization willing to replicate this preschool's success must examine all the program components very carefully.

Classroom Program

The program operates according to the regular school calender, but unlike elementary school children, the preschoolers spend four half-days a week in the classroom. They attend Monday through Thursday, either in the morning or the afternoon session, and spend Friday at home with their families. (Fridays are often days on which the Centre holds special events for families and teachers also use Fridays as a time to make their home visits.)

The curriculum experienced in the classrooms is a child-centred, "developmentally appropriate active learning [one which] support[s] children's self-initiated learning activities" (Schweinhart et al., 1993). Everything is done to create a stimulating environment where the child will develop his/her curiosity and sense of wonder and develop to the fullest of his/her intellectual and language capacities. The staff, however, recognize that unless children feel secure and valued, they will not blossom intellectually or socially; hence care and respect for each child is a prerequisite of all classroom activities.

Part of the plan to stimulate and involve the children includes taking them on field trips as often as possible. Each week the children walk to the local library, and they leave the Centre in vans on an average of twice a month to visit city parks, museums, farms, supermarkets, and to pick apples in the autumn.

This program component is run by four college-educated elementary teachers with the assistance of four associate teachers who are trained on the job. Other special features of the classroom program are the Speech and Language and Music Therapy Programs:

- *Speech and Language Program:* As an extension of the regular language development work carried out in the classroom a Speech Pathologist, from the Government of Saskatchewan's Child and Youth Services, works once a week with children requiring special help.
- *Music Therapy Program:* A music therapist works with the children for one-half day a week. She works directly with the children in each classroom for approximately 30 minutes.

Nutrition Program

Every day the children receive a substantial snack which supplies one-third of their daily nutritional requirements. Because of a grant from REACH (Regina Education and Action on Child Hunger), the Early Learning Centre is able to employ a part-time cook who prepares the

snack and brings it to each classroom. (At present, the cook is also employed as one of the Centre's part-time drivers.)

Transportation Program

All children in the program are offered the option of being transported to and from the Centre daily. To do this, the Centre owns one van and rents three others from the Saskatchewan government's Central Vehicle Pool. Four part-time drivers are employed to transport the children.

Family-Outreach Program

One of the two major goals of the Early Learning Centre is to work with parents in the education of their children. To this end, the staff run an active outreach program. The major components of this are: 1) opening the school and classrooms to the parents; 2) running special events to encourage families to visit the Centre; and 3) visiting the children and their families in their homes.

Health Program

Public Health Nurses from the Sunrise Health Program, City of Regina, work with the staff to identify and respond to any health concerns. Together the nurses and the staff also deliver a health education program to the children which considers, amongst other things, nutrition, hygiene and dental care.

Other Aspects of the Program

The elements outlined above form the core of the "program" that is available to the children and their families. And while this publicly visible program is the Centre's *raison d'être*, the program would not be what it is today without other, more covert aspects of the project running in tandem. These hidden and supporting aspects are: 1) continuous professional development of the staff; 2) community outreach; 3) social program for the staff; and 4) fundraising program.

Continuous Professional Development

There is continuous on-site, in-service training at the Early Learning Centre. On most Friday mornings some time is devoted to professional development. Issues and concerns are discussed, and information gathered at conferences and workshops is shared. When either the staff or the Director identify an area of concern where they would like more information, efforts are made to invite a specialist to come to the school to make a presentation or to run a workshop.

In addition to making resource persons available to the staff, every effort is made to foster an attitude of curiosity and intellectual inquiry. The school subscribes to several early childhood publications, and thanks to a donation is a lifetime member of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Community Outreach

From the beginning the Early Learning Centre has been a community-based organization; it was begun by Anne Luke to serve the inner city community while depending on the wider community for support.

The Director and staff constantly endeavour to draw on resources from the wider community, but also try to be of service to it in return. The staff try to accommodate requests from other agencies either to place children or to make special arrangements for them. In turn, the staff of other agencies often assist the Early Learning Centre staff. Of particular note is the support the Centre receives from several professionals from Child and Youth Services.

In 1993, the Centre formed a partnership with the Sacred Heart Preschool of the Regina

Catholic School Board. Apart from moral support gained, the Early Learning Centre can now draw on some of the resources of the Catholic School Board.

The Executive Director devotes a great deal of time to community outreach work. She gives many talks and is often invited to community meetings pertaining to the welfare of children, where she acts in an advisory capacity.

As part of the community-outreach program, members of the public are frequently invited to the Centre. Interested visitors are always welcome and whenever possible are shown around. Placement students from the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College teacher education program, the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences (SIAST) childcare program and, at times, some high schools are accommodated.

Community outreach is a two-way process and was necessary for the survival of the Centre in its early years, when little was known about preschooling and few formal supports existed. Even today, the Centre is supported by a core of volunteers willing to help out with odd jobs and to work on committees. For instance, it has a special partnership with the Canadian Federation of University Women (University of Regina). Every year the Centre invites its benefactors to a Christmas tea.

Social Program for the Staff

Although the staff would probably not recognize a "social" component of the program, as an observer I perceived it to be a very important element of what makes the Early Learning Centre a special place. Apart from the informal chats and get-togethers, the staff have some more structured time for socializing.

Unless there is a special workshop scheduled, the staff meet every Friday morning from 8:30 to 9:00 to have coffee and muffins and chat. The muffins, made by one of the staff, are donated. Once a month there is a potluck lunch which all the staff, including the drivers, attend and contribute a dish. In addition, there are special events such as the beginning and end-of-the-year get-togethers at a staff member's house and other "fun" events.

During the time that I spent at the Centre, two staff members acted as an informal social committee to arrange these events. One memorable example was the "mystery lunch." The entire staff ate at tables arranged in the hallway. I sat and laughed along with them as I ordered from the "mystery menu" and shook my head in delighted disbelief as my confused order began to arrive. As I enjoyed myself the deeper significance of what these events meant to the program began to dawn on me.

I grew up in Ireland in the 1950s surrounded by a very popular slogan of Bishop Fulton Sheehan's: "The family who prays together stays together." At the mystery lunch and on many subsequent occasions, I felt it appropriate to rewrite the slogan as: "The staff who laugh together stay together." Indeed, despite low salaries, the staff at the Early Learning Centre have been remarkably stable over the years. Research has shown that staff who "do not change jobs often" (Schweinhart et al., 1993, p. 17) is one of the important characteristics of a successful preschool program. Although not the only factor contributing to staff stability, the camaraderie that the modest social program creates is no doubt a factor in helping staff to identify with the Centre. While certainly not trying to minimize the burden and anxieties that inadequate funding causes, being required to work together on fundraising projects also helps galvanize the staff's sense of mission.

Fundraising Program

While 64% of the Centre's funding comes from government grants, the rest has to be raised anew each year. A substantial amount of the staff's ingenuity and energy is expended on this task.

Before she retired in 1994, the Centre's part-time accountant estimated that up to a quarter of the Director's time is spent on tasks which are in some way related to fundraising. These tasks involve making inquiries about grants, attending meetings, giving presentations about the Centre and participating in the United Way Campaign. Many of the routine tasks of fundraising fall to the lot of the administrative assistant. It is she who prepares grant applications and organizes fundraising events like the Annual Dinner. Other staff members and some parents are also involved in these efforts: the secretary runs the annual chocolate drive and the teachers and drivers help out with special events like the mystery bingo and cook and serve the dinner every year.

Following this brief overview of the Early Learning Centre, the remainder of this section will be devoted to describing and analyzing the structure of the program and highlighting some of its special features. Other of its special characteristics, such as the classroom and the family outreach program, will be the focus of later chapters.

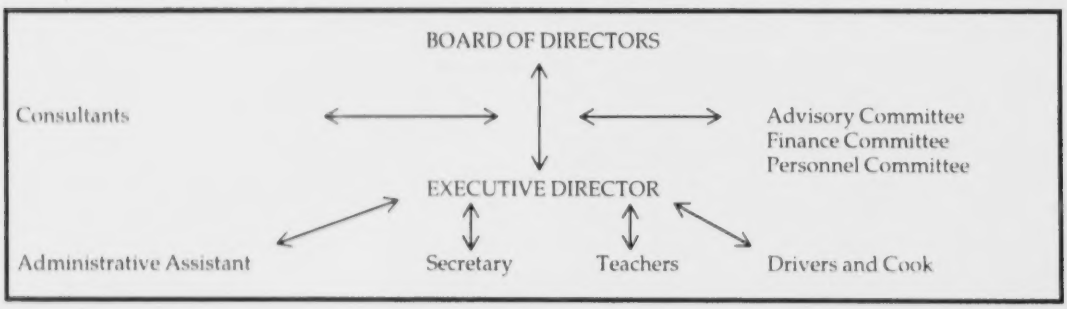
STRUCTURE OF AUTHORITY AT THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

The Early Learning Centre is incorporated as a nonprofit organization. It is governed by a seven-person board which is elected by the parents, who form a majority of its memberss. Other interested individuals who are involved in the low-income and/or First Nations and Metis community may stand for election.

When the Centre began, a three-person Advisory Board was established to be called upon in times of crisis. While the Advisory Board does not meet on a regular or frequent basis, individual members, each of whom has some particular expertise, are available to the Board and staff to offer their insights. In response to a funding crisis in 1986, an advisory finance committee was created to develop and implement fundraising initiatives and to make relevant recommendations to the Board. This committee presently meets every second month. A personnel committee meets to help with hiring staff — this committee consists of members of the community, representatives of the Board, staff representatives and the Executive Director.

The program is also sustained and supported by consultants, each of whom has specific expertise and experience and can be called upon to give advice to the Board and/or to the Executive Director. In the day-to-day running of the Centre, the Executive Director often calls upon them to discuss an issue or invites them to a discussion with the entire staff. The Director also calls upon them to give workshops to the staff or parents on issues which are identified as needs, such as on hyperactive children or parenting skills. At present, there are five consultants: two individuals (a former teacher who also founded an inner-city preschool and a school principal) and three agencies (professionals from Child and Youth Services, Saskatchewan Department of Health; a consultant from the Day Care Division, Department of Social Services; and nurses from the City of Regina, Sunrise Health Program.). The diagram below illustrates the structure of the Early Learning Centre.

As the diagram indicates, the Executive Director plays a key role in the structure of the



organization; she is the linchpin that keeps information flowing freely between the outside community and the staff. Because her role is so important, it will be described and analyzed before other aspects of the program.

PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION

The Role of the Executive Director

The Executive Director plays the pivotal role in determining the success of the Centre. To keep the organization running effectively requires overseeing the program itself, overseeing the administration, insuring the philosophical orientation of the program, and constantly searching for adequate funding to keep the program viable. It requires a great deal of dedication, a wide variety of skills, and hard work.

In order to get an idea on how the Executive Director spends her time, her activities for a two-week period were closely monitored, as well as her phone notes for that period. The following is an account of those two weeks which will help to show the complexity of her role and the demands on her time. Following this other aspects of her work will be discussed. Finally, her style of management will be analyzed.

How the Executive Director Spends Her Time

On a typical day, the Executive Director's work might begin with a 7:00 a.m. call from a sick staff member and subsequent phone calls to find a substitute teacher or driver. Upon arriving at the Centre at 8:30, the Director quickly checks that all the staff are in and confers briefly with the secretary-receptionist regarding any important messages, to clarify the progress being made on any administrative work ("has the first draft of the United Way Funding Application been typed?"), and to discuss any outside appointments. Between 8:30 and 9:00 a.m., members of the teaching staff pop into her office to let her know of upcoming absences or to express concern over the welfare of a particular child. Just as the Early Learning Centre has an open-door policy for parents, the Executive Director has an open-door policy with her staff: she remains open and accessible to the staff bringing any concerns about particular children, or about the way a team is working together. During this brief period of time, the Executive Director often arranges to meet with a staff member(s) in order to deal more completely with the issue in question.

When the vans begin to arrive and the teachers head down to their classrooms, it is not uncommon for the drivers to mention their concerns to the Director: since the drivers pick up and drop off children at their homes each day, and frequently exchange a quick word with parents, they often have a clear sense of what is happening in a home. They may be told of a child's illness, may receive notice that a family is planning to move or notice a significant change in a child's situation — for example, a child who is usually well dressed and waiting for the van to arrive is suddenly not ready on time and is less carefully groomed. Since the driver's message board is right beside the administrative offices, information can be exchanged through quick verbal exchanges or memos. After these seemingly informal talks with both staff and drivers, the Executive Director often has a list of tasks to follow up upon: to contact a parent, to contact a Public Health nurse, to set up speech and language services for a particular child, to ask the Administrative Assistant to enroll a new child, or to contact a social worker to try to locate a family who has moved without leaving a new address. These tasks relating to the welfare of children generally take priority over more routine administrative tasks.

When particular families are going through some type of crisis the Executive Director attempts to act in a way which will both ensure the safety of the child and which is as respectful and supportive of the family as possible. There is hardly a day that passes without at least one

parent phoning and speaking with the Executive Director about some type of concern. During the time that the Executive Director's notes were reviewed, a considerable amount of time was spent addressing the concerns of a father whose wife had recently left him with sole custody of the children. Issues of concern included ensuring that all staff understood that the father's phone number was not to be made available to the mother, clarifying the Centre's position regarding the noncustodial parent's right to visit the Centre, suggesting the most desirable procedure regarding visiting, informing the classroom staff of the child's current situation, and encouraging the father to attend an upcoming parenting workshop.

At other times, the Executive Director may respond to issues of abuse or neglect, concerns about family violence, family breakup, changes in custody arrangements, or children being taken into foster care or returning to their natural home. If outside engagements prevent the Executive Director from responding immediately to these concerns, she delegates responsibility to the Administrative Assistant.

The Executive Director also oversees and/or coordinates the more formal aspects of the parent outreach program. Although classroom teachers are responsible for arranging monthly events within their own classroom and arranging home visits, the Executive Director plays a major part in planning some of the more important events: the Christmas party, a health fair, multicultural day, clothing exchanges and the several parenting programs run during the year. During the past two years, the staff have spent a considerable amount of time reflecting upon and planning ways in which to increase parental involvement in the program.

On days when she is not immediately occupied in urgent business, the Executive Director attempts to spend time in one or two of the classrooms: to greet the children and get to know their faces, to give them a sense of who she is and to observe the dynamics of each of the four classrooms. This "hands-on" approach means that the Executive Director has an actual sense of what is happening within her program and is able to deal with issues quickly and effectively. The staff know that if the administrative demands were not so heavy, she would gladly spend much more time with the children.

Coordinating the staff and planning appropriate staff development activities is another major responsibility of the Executive Director. The staff meets weekly for approximately 1-1½ hours. The Executive Director prepares the agenda and acts as the facilitator during these meetings. Because the organization incorporates consultative approaches to every aspect of its operation, staff are frequently consulted on a wide range of administrative and program issues ranging from whether a particular fundraising event should be undertaken to possible topics for future staff development workshops or ideas for parent-outreach events. The Executive Director generally is responsible for coordinating staff development workshops which often occur on Friday mornings. During the course of the Program Development and Evaluation Project, a number of workshops were coordinated by program staff.

Few days pass without the Executive Director spending some time focussing on internal administrative issues. A large proportion of administrative time is spent considering the issue of financing. The Administration must determine what types of fundraising activities and grant applications should be pursued, assess what the staff and equipment needs are, and decide whether sufficient funds can be allocated to meet these needs. This is perhaps one of the most stressful aspects of the Executive Director's job. There never seems to be enough money to both deliver a high-quality program and provide just and equitable salaries for the staff.

Funding-related activities take a great deal of the Executive Director's time. It is not uncommon for her to spend at least two half-days a week attending meetings related to funding concerns. During particularly busy times of the year, the Executive Director spends close to half her time attending funding-related meetings. Although other staff coordinate many of the

smaller fundraising projects (mystery bingo, chocolate drive, annual dinner, raffle), the Executive Director works at preparing and/or reviewing grant proposals, presenting grant proposals to funding agencies, meeting with funders and potential funders, making presentations to community groups and working with the Finance Advisory Committee. During the two-week period when activities were monitored, a considerable amount of time was spent in preparing a grant application for the United Way and meeting with United Way staff. In our current economic times, fundraising is becoming increasingly difficult and time consuming and requires greater levels of sophistication and skill.

Finally, a considerable amount of the Executive Director's time is spent in more general outreach work: participating in committees like the Regina Coalition of Human Service Organizations (RCOHS), responding and participating in community initiatives to address issues of poverty and children's rights, and building partnerships with other organizations in the community. During the two weeks when phone notes were reviewed, time was spent discussing the possibility of the Executive Director accompanying a Department of Social Services Staff person to La Loche and Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, to offer staff development workshops to two pilot project preschool programs. As well, the Director attended a sod-turning ceremony for a second-stage house at which time she had the opportunity to meet informally with politicians, government officials, representatives from other funding agencies and administrative staff from other nongovernmental organizations. The Executive Director also had several phone conferences with different personnel from the Regina Catholic School Board regarding the possibility of developing a partnership between the Early Learning Centre and the Sacred Heart Community Preschool, a partnership which would include a sharing of skills and equipment. The need for this type of work is twofold. First, the Early Learning Centre sees itself as only part of the solution to the poverty and lack of opportunity facing poor families. There is a hope that by working cooperatively with other agencies and groups, the Early Learning Centre can play a role in addressing some of these issues. Second, networking of this type can frequently be followed up to the benefit of the program: in an operation that runs on a financial shoestring, no stone can be left unturned.

Overseeing Staff and Programs

> An essential ingredient of quality early childhood programs is a well-trained staff that is supported by knowledgeable and sensitive administrators. (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1988, p. 21)

The overwhelming consensus based on decades of research is that knowledgeable, task-oriented, caring and sensitive administrators are one of the distinguishing features of all successful educational programs. From their wide experience in accreditation of early childhood programs, the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (1984) has found that "having a well-qualified early childhood specialist to direct the educational program is one of the more powerful predictors of classroom practice than are staff and child ratios and group sizes" (p. 14).

It is often difficult to find in one person the qualities that make a successful early-childhood administrator, particularly when the institution is situated in a low-income, cross-cultural setting. The Director of the Early Learning Centre is knowledgeable about child development, and experiences and practices suitable for young children. She was trained as an elementary teacher in England and then taught young children there and later in Canada. When she set up the Early Learning Centre in 1977, she was its first teacher and driver and trained her parent assistants on the job, and she has continued to have this practical experience ever since. This has given her a vast store of practical knowledge which she uses to interpret and understand her staff's concerns and struggles.

The Director's knowledge, however, is not only practical, it is also theoretical. She started

with a good knowledge of early childhood practices but over the years, through reading and reflection, she has developed and refined that knowledge base. She is highly articulate about the theory and philosophy which lies behind all aspects of the Centre's policies and practices. She often uses this knowledge and ability to analyze situations: for example, when individual staff come to her with concerns about children, or during staff in-services, program evaluations, and team or individual evaluations.

When the Director started the Early Learning Centre in an area of the city with a high proportion of First Nations and Metis residents, she did not have any specific cross-cultural training, and learned on the job. She learned a lot from Muriel Lerat — her first parent volunteer and later her first classroom assistant. Her strong values of "mutuality and respect" helped her to learn in this way: Anne says that whenever she was not sure of something she would "go and ask Muriel." Since then she has followed numerous cross-cultural workshops and made this training available to her staff. She has also attended Cree classes and taken time off to complete a Social Work degree.

Although in practice it is impossible to separate supervision of staff from supervision of the program, in order to highlight some special features of the Director's methods of supervision, an attempt will be made to analyze her supervision of both aspects of the program separately.

Supervision of Staff

"You could not wish for a better boss."

"Anne can tell you something bad ... something that you could do better and you end up feeling good about it."

"I know that Anne is my boss, but I feel that she is also my friend. She really cares about all of us."

"There is no one out there like Anne, no one of her status."

"In the years that I have worked here, I have never once seen Anne in bad humour: she has her down days like everyone else but she never takes it out on the staff."

"Anne leads from behind."

(Staff of the Early Learning Centre)

These are just a sample of the comments about the Centre's Director, made by her present and past staff. Some of these comments were made in reply to a question about why working at the Early Learning Centre was enjoyable — in answering this question everyone made some reference to the Director's qualities. Other comments were made during general discussions or casual conversations.

During the time that I have spent at the Early Learning Centre, I have seen nothing to negate the high praise that all the staff have for the Director. In fact, I strongly concur with their conclusions and will attempt to analyze some of the more salient features of how she deals with people or, as one of the staff said, "her way with people."

Reciprocity (mutuality) and respect are the two fundamental values on which the Early Learning Centre is founded. These two values permeate all of the Director's interactions with people. These values are a driving force in her life and helped prompt her to give up the security of a permanent teaching job with the Regina Public School Board to found the Early Learning Centre. These founding values are part of her personality.

Although the style of supervision at the Centre reflects the personality of its Director, in that it is indirect and nonthreatening, it is not haphazard or casual. There is a very definite but flexible structure to the system of staff supervision that has been worked out over the years as the Centre grew. Other key notions which became apparent when analyzing the supervision at the Early Learning Centre were care, concern, attention to detail, and flexibility, while keeping

a constant eye on the goals or the task to be accomplished. The Director's attitude is summed up in the following statement:

> We have policies to guide us but in practice we must be flexible and humane. We must always use our judgment to make the final decision.

A great deal of time, care and perceptiveness are put into the Director's dealing with staff. According to the staff, "Anne always deals with issues" and, although it would be easier for her "to turn a blind eye," after reflection she discusses the issue with staff in the most direct but tactful way that she can find. As one of the staff said, "She always sees the good in everyone." From my own observations, it is this ability to see people's strengths that helps her to put any critical comments into a positive framework.

Most of the supervision is indirect, coming in the form of support or appreciation. The Director takes every opportunity to point out to the staff — as a whole or individually — what a good job they are doing. When doing this she most often makes reference to a specific improvement or task they have done recently. One of the staff commented, "When I typed that report she really showed her appreciation, but I was only doing my job." Also at program evaluations and planning meetings, she constantly highlights the positive, "I like what I am hearing. Some of you are getting new insights because you are putting yourself in the parents' shoes."

The indirect style of supervision is also highlighted in the amount of self-evaluation that the staff are encouraged to do. The Director meets with the teaching teams twice a year — once in the autumn and once at the end of the year. She also meets with each staff member individually. Here she usually listens to the staff members' self-evaluations and, then comments on what they have said and on what she has seen happening. For the team meetings, the staff are usually asked to reflect on a set of questions beforehand and to complete a "role efficacy scale." Although these guidelines and structures are in place, the Director sometimes adopts a different approach to better fit the circumstances. For example, in June 1994, she asked teachers to reflect on the changes they had made in their teaching. Flexibility is also evident in the scheduling of meetings.

As a result of the emphasis on self-evaluation and encouragement to find their own solutions, the staff have a sense of control over their own destinies. This message of power and worth is also conveyed in the attention to detail given by the Director and the Administrative Assistant in planning meetings and events. This care signals to staff that their time is valuable.

Care, respect and willingness to spend time and listen are some of the reasons that the Director has been able to gain the respect and trust of her Native staff, both past and present. When Muriel Lerat was reflecting on why Anne gained her trust and the trust of other Native parents, she said, "Anne built consensus in an indirect way. She was willing to spend time with us. When she didn't know something she always asked me." In fact, she is always ready to ask for help and advice from all her staff. In this way, her actions are true to a comment that is often made about her, "She treats everyone the same." Although she treats everyone with the same respect, she is also tactful and sensitive to different individuals' backgrounds and histories.

Although the Director is sensitive and concerned with the well-being of the staff, she never loses sight of the primary goal of the program — the well-being of the children is paramount. When staff have personal problems that are interfering with their work, the issue is discussed with them, and they are helped to find solutions.

The Director's consistency and ability to focus on what is essential are often commented upon by staff and visitors to the Centre. For instance, the secretary told me recently, "I don't know how she does it, but Anne never puts people on hold whether it is a parent, the staff or children." This ability to make time for people is evident from the earlier account of how she

spends her time. Her open-door policy allows staff to communicate directly with her and helps break down the hierarchical authority structure.

Overseeing the Program

The Director seems to be happiest when she can spend time every day in the classrooms, but this is not always possible. In a recent conversation she said to me, "One of my lacks is not spending enough time in the classrooms." In spite of that self-assessment, I have frequently been amazed by how often she asks me if I have seen a new project, items on display, or children's art in the classrooms.

When Anne Luke set up the Early Learning Centre in 1977, she was not aware of any formal theory of curriculum design or evaluation. However, in the first summer after she had resigned her job, she reflected on how to set up the preschool and seems to have spontaneously hit upon Ralph Tyler's (1949, p. i) four fundamental questions about curriculum design:

- What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
- What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
- How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
- How can we determine if these purposes are being attained?

In keeping with the dictates of these guiding questions, the Director's first priority was to establish goals for the program which she wanted to set up. From the beginning these goals have remained basically the same: to equalize the educational opportunities of low-income children; and to work with parents towards this goal. Keeping these goals in mind, she constantly monitors both children's experiences at the Centre and attempts to involve parents. Over the years she has attempted to make the staff play an active role in the program evaluation as well as to set up structures to ensure that it is carried out.

While evaluating the program to see if the goals are being met, she is ever attempting to move towards certain ideals. I have observed her support teachers by suggesting appropriate questions to ask about their curriculum, and giving them time to evaluate their programs. Over the years, she has attempted to move the program from one based on teacher-prepared activities to one based on teacher knowledge and judgment of child development. Overall there has been an attempt to set up a program that is more rooted in the experiences of the children and the community, rather than on some romantic view of what is good for the child — less emphasis on pretty rooms and Disney-like representations of the child's world. What the Director and staff seem to be aiming for is a focus on projects and activities that follow the child's lead and yet are guided and structured by the teacher.

The structured time that the Director has set aside for evaluation is spread throughout the year but it is the major focus of the two days of evaluation at the end of June and of the goal-setting days before school starts up in September. Teachers continue to improve in their ability to evaluate their teaching because, throughout the year, they are given information about appropriate curriculum and children's development. This is provided in a variety of ways: they are given articles to read; they attend conferences and report on what they have learned; and in-services are held. Once teachers have evaluated their programs, they then set their own goals; twice during 1993-94 school year, at Christmas and in June, they evaluated how they have achieved these goals. From what I have observed, goals are constantly adjusted to fit in with the teachers' growing understanding and with the particular group of children in the four classrooms. This readjustment is also evident in the outreach program. Over the two years of the study, there has been a growth in the staff's ability to analyze their program.

I have also observed a higher level of concerns being addressed in goal-setting in September

1993 compared to 1992. This can be explained, in part, by a general growth in teacher awareness, and also by the questions posed by the Director to help them focus on the previous year. Her questions related to broader issues centered around how they helped the child become more thoughtful and autonomous, and how they fostered self-confidence.

The Director also fosters the teachers' critical spirit and participation in program evaluation by having them analyze "buzz words." Recently, during a discussion, she asked each teacher to state what they meant by "child-centred." She then wrote everyone's contribution on a chart and together they came up with a working definition of what "child-centred" is and what it is not. The difference between "discipline" and "punishment" was discussed in a similar manner.

Other aspects of the classroom program are also monitored: the Music Therapist, the Speech and Language Consultant, and the Social Worker from Child and Youth Services were invited to the program evaluation. They were asked to discuss their contributions and to tell staff how they could be used more effectively to help the children and their families. These discussions resulted in the following adjustments to plans for the coming year: the Speech and Language Consultant and Music Therapist want to do some joint planning; the Music Therapist will give the teachers her plans for each month; and the Speech and Language Consultant will change her timetable in order to meet parents and teachers on the same day that she works with the children.

Over the past two years a renewed emphasis has been put on involving parents in the program, thus considerable time has been spent focussing the teacher on the family outreach aspect of the program. About half of the time of program evaluation and goal-setting over the past two years has been devoted to this. Drivers are often involved in the planning and evaluation of this aspect of the program.

Other Administrative Staff

Before discussing other aspects of the program, the role of the two other members of the administrative staff will be discussed. Apart from the Executive Director, the administrative staff consists of an Administrative Assistant, a Secretary and a part-time Accountant (phased out in June 1994). The roles of the Administrative Assistant and the Secretary will be outlined below.

Administrative Assistant

Like the Executive Director, the Administrative Assistant's job is varied and demanding. Funding and related issues occupy a large proportion of her time. While the Executive Director frequently makes the contacts with potential funders and presents applications, it is the Administrative Assistant who takes the time to write up grant applications. Because different funders have very different application procedures and funding criteria, each application differs and requires preparation time. As well, she also oversees and coordinates most of the internal fundraising efforts. These include organizing a mystery bingo (for which approximately 30-40 small prizes must be donated), organizing the annual dinner which includes coordinating the meal, preparing an annual funding appeal letter and periodic newsletters to regular donors, and organizing prizes for a raffle. During the 1993-94 fiscal year, the Administrative Assistant also spent a considerable amount of time organizing a cookbook which is being sold as a fundraising venture.

Along with these funding-related duties, the Administrative Assistant performs a wide variety of internal administrative duties. One particularly time-consuming job is overseeing and coordinating the enrollment process. Each month, several children move and this often requires readjusting driving routes, which can be a complicated task. Most months at least one child leaves the program and this requires searching the waiting list for the first child who comes from basically the same area of the city, contacting that family, and if a successful contact is made arranging an appointment to complete the enrollment forms. However, because of the

length of time many children have been on the waiting lists, the fact that many families do not have telephones, and the fact that many families have moved, enrolling a new child can be a time-consuming task.

On days when the Executive Director is attending meetings outside the school, the Administrative Assistant oversees all the internal issues: talking to families with a particular concern or facing some type of crisis, setting up meetings with external resource people, talking to Board members about particular concerns, and rearranging enrollment appointments. This can take up all her time — as she commented in her notes, "11:30 a.m. already and I haven't started on what I wanted to do this morning."

Secretary

As is the case in many institutions, the Secretary is the first contact many people have with the Centre. She sets the tone of the caller's future relationship with the institution, be it a harried parent in the midst of a crisis or a potential volunteer. She treats all callers as "clients," no matter how difficult. In addition to typing and answering phone calls, the Secretary keeps the children's files up-to-date, organizes and maintains the filing, helps set up some meetings, takes charge of some fundraising events (such as the chocolate drive), and runs several petty cash accounts. Her tasks are many and she is a presence that is felt throughout the Centre.

The Secretary is very articulate about her belief in the ideals of the Centre and commitment to the work being accomplished. These sentiments are borne out by her actions: she is knowledgeable about many details of the programs and procedures and she attends all fundraising events, even those which mean a late night in the city: she has a young family and commutes to Regina from a small town. She is also knowledgeable about the children and their families and likes to help in classrooms when a substitute teacher cannot be found.

She says that since she came to the Centre almost two years ago, she has learnt a lot. She now has a much better understanding of what it is like to live on a low income, with all of the daily struggles and pressures involved. She is also a good example of the self-selection process — she heard about the Centre because she used to commute to work with one of the teachers. She liked what she heard and so when a job came up, she applied and got it. Now she says that her sense of job satisfaction far exceeds her expectations.

The Secretary puts a lot of thought and effort into her job but feels that she "receives so much in return." She says that it makes her happy to see the children working and playing so contentedly in the classroom, adding that "my work is part of what makes that happen." In fact, she works very closely with the two administrators in order to help everything run smoothly. She meets weekly with the Director to discuss up-coming work and events and to iron out any problems. Recently, she has discussed and reflected on how she can make the jobs of the two administrators easier. She has found that she can reply to the questions of many people who want to speak to the administrators, and because of this she always asks what people want before directing in-coming phone calls.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF

The teaching staff fulfill a key role in the Early Learning Centre because the educational component is the heart of the program. How they actually carry out their roles in the classroom will become obvious in the following chapter on "Life in the Classrooms." Because of this, only aspects of the teachers' duties not covered elsewhere in the report, such as the composition of the staff and the hiring policy, will be discussed.

The four teaching teams are each made of a teacher and an associate teacher. Although the members of the teaching staff are usually referred to as "the teachers," it is the teacher and not

the associate teacher who has ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the children, the planning and the evaluation. To highlight this distinction, the teachers meet on their own to deal with duties that are theirs alone and not a team responsibility.

At present, the makeup of the teams mirrors the Centre's hiring policy, which specifies that there be a person of First Nations or Metis ancestry in each classroom. The Early Learning Centre has a waiver from the Saskatchewan Human Rights Commission which allows it to hire the highest qualified First Nations or Metis person to maintain this racial balance. In spite of this determination to hire appropriate role models for the children, all who are employed as teachers (rather than associates) must have a Saskatchewan Teaching Diploma or the equivalent.

In an effort to ensure that the pairing between the teacher and the associate teacher is compatible, the teacher or associate sits in on the interview for her new partner. Members of the Personnel Committee also take part in the interviews of new staff, which are conducted following a questionnaire which is based on the philosophy of the Centre. At the interview, new staff are also asked if they will participate in fundraising.

As well as participating in fundraising and carrying out their teaching duties, the teaching staff share other housekeeping and routine administrative duties. In order to oversee the smooth running of these duty rosters, such as repairing the books in the school's library, a new designation of lead teacher has been created.

Lead Teacher

The principal role of this teacher is to give leadership and to act as a kind of liaison between the Director and the other teaching staff. Since supportive supervision of teaching staff is one of the major hallmarks of successful preschools (Schweinhart et al., 1993), she gives leadership but also ensures that routine tasks are completed. As well, she sees that new curriculum initiatives are implemented. At times, the lead teacher may also give informal in-services to help other teachers make these changes. For instance, she shared her methods for keeping anecdotal records and keeping the children's binders up to date. Research has shown that this type of on-site in-service of coaching is very effective in stimulating teacher change.

The role of the lead teacher seems to fill a need; however, since it has only been recently created, it is still being defined. Perhaps the Director decided to create it as a result of an observation that I made on a few occasions during the course of the present evaluation: "In order for changes to be carried out, structures must also be created to facilitate them." The Centre's "Teacher Orientation Program" is an example of the creation of such a structure.

Teacher Orientation Program

Shortly after the beginning of this project, a newly hired teacher resigned because she felt that her philosophy of teaching did not fit with that of the Centre; in addition, she seemed to feel overwhelmed with the amount of new information she had to cope with during her first few weeks of teaching. She had to become familiar with all aspects of the Centre, get to know the children, and teach at the same time. As a participant observer, I suggested that when the next new teacher was hired, she be given a week-long orientation during which time a substitute should be found to work in the classroom. This idea was discussed by the staff and they decided to try it.

All of the teachers, especially the Administrative Assistant (a former teacher) worked on the preparation of the orientation program. The program includes giving the new teacher information about the Centre and the curriculum, making curriculum documents available to her, and structuring some time for reflection and discussion with other staff members. Some time is built in for classroom observation in all rooms, including the new teacher's future room. Finally,

there is time for the teacher to establish a professional relationship with the associate. In order to structure this familiarization, the script for a dialogue was sketched out. The framework for this dialogue is based on a similar one which is carried out by the cooperating teacher-internship pair at the University of Regina Internship Seminar. Both the teacher and the associate teacher were very pleased with the orientation program and were able to make suggestions for additional information that could be made available during the next orientation.

Associate Teachers

Unlike the teachers, the associate teachers are given a six-month, on-the-job training during which time their salary is paid by Canada Manpower. Over the years, the associate teachers have come from a wide range of backgrounds but many are recruited from among the parents or other members of the local low-income community. Many of them have tended to use their experience as a stepping stone and have gone for further training or assumed other leadership roles in their communities.

One of the reasons that the classroom program is so successful is that such care is taken in hiring the teaching staff and in establishing team relationships. Furthermore, it is evident that all the teaching staff believe in what they are doing and are fully committed to the goals of the Centre. In replying to an open-ended, anonymous written questionnaire about how the Early Learning Centre is perceived in the community, the teachers and associate teachers all replied that they believed it to be well respected for the entire 17 years of operation. It is this belief in what they are doing that is probably a large factor in keeping the teachers at the Centre, since they are undoubtedly underpaid, and have to become involved in fundraising as one of their duties.

Other aspects of the Centre's program also support and ensure the success of the classroom program. The transportation program is one of these supports.

THE TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM

Rationale

The transportation program is costly but the Board, staff and parents agree that it is a crucial part of the Centre's success. It is one of the principal reasons why the program is accessible to so many families and results in relatively high attendance rates. Because for many years there was only one program of this type in Regina, children are transported from all over the city.

Without this program, many low-income children would not be able to attend the preschool because many of the families do not own cars. Neither is using public transport a practical option because of the costs and time involved (most families would have to take at least two buses). Also, waiting at a bus stop in severe winter weather with one or more young children would be very difficult. Doubtless, without the transportation program the attendance would not be as high and the children's chances of success would be greatly diminished.

The Drivers and Vans

The Centre hires four drivers and runs and operates four vans. Until recently, the Centre owned its own vans; now three of these vans are leased from the Central Vehicle Agency of the Saskatchewan government. Each van is equipped with a cellular phone.

At the beginning of this study, there were only three vans and three drivers in the program. Among other things, this meant that one van had to make a second trip and, as a result, some children often arrived late for classes. Although the addition of the fourth driver and van has added some extra costs, it helps in the smoother operation of the program. Because there are four vans and four classrooms, the children who live close together can be picked up by the

same van and remain together to form one class. Each driver is then assigned to one classroom, gets to know the children and the parents, and becomes a valuable part of the classroom team along with the teachers.

Organization of the Transportation Program

Assigning children to vans according to where they live is a time-consuming and intricate task which falls to the lot of the Administrative Assistant. She has worked out a system where each of these pick-ups are colour-coded on a map of the city. Each time a child moves or there is a change in the enrollment, adjustments must be made. It is because of organizational tasks like these that the transportation program is able to work so smoothly.

The transportation program is evaluated regularly. In May 1994, all parents with children being transported in the vans received a questionnaire asking for their opinion of the program and their driver. All who responded were very appreciative of the service. In addition, they felt that the drivers treated both themselves and their children very well. They felt confident allowing their child to travel on the buses and some added that it was wonderful to have First Nations drivers.

When analyzing the transportation program two salient features emerge: 1) the drivers' work is valued by the teachers and the administration; and 2) the drivers are consulted regularly on the running of the program, and that information is used by the administration to fine-tune the organization.

This care, concern and respect is in turn shown by the drivers in their dealings with the children and their parents. Great care is shown in all matters concerning the safety and well being of the children. Strict guidelines are also set out for driving in icy conditions. If it is deemed to be at all dangerous, the vans do not run. If the drivers are unsure, they go out first thing in the morning and check out the visibility and the state of the side roads. Before making a final decision about whether or not to drive, the drivers consult by phone with the Director.

Several items in the "Policy and Procedure Manual" refer to obligatory procedures for transporting the children to and from school and on field trips (see Appendix 6). Several of these procedures place great emphasis on communication: for example, the teacher should tell the driver if a child has been picked up during the day by a parent. In turn, the drivers should inform the teachers when a child is absent and inform them of the reasons.

Several features of the organization facilitate smooth communication. The drivers have a weekly meeting with the administration where they discuss aspects of the program that are running smoothly and not so smoothly. For example, they discuss the problems of children not being ready for the buses in the morning, or parents who are not consistently signaling that they are home when the child is dropped off. During these meetings drivers regularly try to find better solutions to long-term problems, for example, where to park on a busy street to pick up a child. If the drivers have concerns that involve the teachers, either the Director or the Administrative Assistant informs teachers at the staff meeting which is held every Tuesday.

The drivers also take part in the year-end assessment meetings. While the teachers discuss curricular matters, the drivers discuss the transportation program and then report their concerns immediately to the other staff. This year, for example, the drivers brought to the teachers' attention the importance of writing memos when communicating with them. Drivers check their notice boards for messages each time they come in to the school, as it is very important that they have up-to-date information about the children and where they should be dropped off.

In the job interview, emphasis is put first on hiring a reliable driver who shows evidence of

liking children. However, other qualities such as respect for people from different racial backgrounds, openness, flexibility, and a willingness to participate in fundraising and to help out around the Centre when needed are also sought. For instance, in wintertime drivers help dress the children to go outside; they also act as substitute teachers and help out with baby-sitting younger siblings during parent events. Although the drivers' main responsibility concerns the children's safety on the vans, their role spills over into all aspects of the Centre's program.

Reflecting this wider role, drivers participate in many of the in-services that are put on for the teachers as well as actively participate in all social events such as the monthly potluck lunch. A new development is the team meeting between the instructional staff and the driver for each room, which takes place just before the potluck lunch. This year the driver and the two teachers planned the outreach program for networking together with parents.

A Typical Day on the Vans

In order to learn how the transportation program works, I travelled on all four vans to collect the children and to drop them off after school. I also went on several field trips and was present when parents and children were brought in to attend special events on Fridays.

All of the drivers seem to enjoy their work but at the same time find it quite demanding. In addition to the responsibilities of driving 12 young children, they have to act as an extension of the Centre's policies on matters such as discipline. On the trips that I took, I heard the drivers using the same techniques and style of interaction with children as is used in the classroom. I heard a driver speak to a child who was using abusive language: "Those are not nice words. We don't use them because they hurt people's feelings."

Drivers are also the people who have most direct contact with parents. Teachers rely on them to make sure messages are delivered, especially to those parents who do not have phones. They are often the first to become aware of a change in family circumstances. By building friendly relationships with parents they can also help reduce absenteeism.

Drivers know the parents by name and often chat with them; if parents are having a bad day they will often tell the driver — a small but not insignificant support for the parents. When replying to an evaluation form at the end of the year, some parents mentioned that they were pleased to see so many Aboriginal drivers because it was nice for them to have these role models for their children. At present, three of the four drivers are of Aboriginal descent.

On one of my trips in the vans, I witnessed why the cellular phone is such an important tool in the transportation program. When a child was dropped off, the parent was not home so the driver decided to take all the other children home first and then come back to see if the parent had arrived. However, the parent was still not there when the van called the second time. At this stage the driver was able to phone the Centre, the Secretary and the Administrative Assistant consulted and were able to contact the emergency number — in this case the grandparent. The child was delivered to his grandparent's home with a minimum of upset for him.

Since I have been at the Centre, drivers have used their cellular phones to seek advice on whether to drop a child off at home when there is no adult present, or when the van breaks down or is involved in an accident. One of the main reasons for installing the phones is safety: before, when a van broke down, the driver was often stranded with up to 14 three- and four-year-olds.

The drivers are not considered simply as people who drive the vans: they are brought into the Centre's community, learn the philosophy and are included as part of the overall team. In general, great care is taken to ensure that they feel included, that their opinions are valued, and that their contributions are recognized. Perhaps to highlight this and following the success of

the teacher-orientation program, a modified orientation program for new drivers was also initiated. All in all the transportation program is one of the crucial components of the total program offered by the Early Learning Centre and a key link in the parent-outreach program. The drivers are the staff members with the greatest opportunity to keep in touch with the families on a daily basis, form relationships with them, and encourage the parents or grandparents to visit the classrooms and attend special events.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this section, the overall content and structure of the program were outlined. Some of the program components, such as the administration and the transportation program, were analyzed in detail. The classroom program and the parent-outreach portions of the program will be discussed in detail in the next chapters.

I spent considerable time analyzing the role of the Executive Director. This was not to romanticize or distort her role but to illustrate the importance of her particular style of administration. Upon reflection, I believe that although the present Executive Director has been a pivotal actor in the development of the Early Learning Centre, her role and the structure of the Centre is so well established that her position could be filled by someone else with the appropriate qualifications.

CHAPTER FIVE:
LIFE IN THE CLASSROOMS

INTRODUCTION

The Early Learning Centre was founded in order to help equalize educational opportunities for children who come from low-income homes through an educational program for preschoolers. From the start, the classroom program has been the heart of the Early Learning Centre's early intervention program. The specific objectives for this aspect of the program are:

- to provide a stimulating environment where the child will learn naturally;
- to create opportunities where the child will develop his/her curiosity and sense of wonder;
- to foster the development of language and self-expression;
- to provide situations, activities, and resource persons meaningful to the child's growth;
- to build competence and to empower children by fostering in each a true sense of self-worth.

In this chapter, I will describe and discuss that program. First, I will briefly introduce the structure and layout of the classrooms; then I will give an overview of the curriculum and describe how two children spend their day in the classroom. Following this, I will discuss the issue of introducing Aboriginal content into the curriculum. The chapter will end with an analysis of the successful aspects of the classroom program as well as some suggestions for where the staff can focus their energies in order to strengthen the program even more.

CLASSROOM STRUCTURE, CONTENT AND LAYOUT

Each of the 96 children who attend the Early Learning Centre are in the classroom for four 2½ hour sessions each week: 48 attend in the morning and 48 attend in the afternoon. In each of the four classrooms the pupil-teacher ration is low (Bredekamp, 1989). Each class of 12 mixed-age three- and four-year-olds is in the care of two adults — a teacher and an associate teacher. Classrooms are identified by colour: red, blue, yellow and green. Often the children, teachers and drivers are identified by colour, for example, "today, the red room is on a field trip so the driver is not available to run that errand."

In each of the rooms the driver helps to take off and put on winter clothing. Recently, efforts have been made to have the drivers become increasingly a part of the team of adults who works with the children in the classroom. Apart from having another adult to help out, this creates continuity because children are divided into rooms according to which van they come to school on.

Each classroom is large (746 square feet or 69 square metres). All classrooms are identical except that two have a western exposure and two have an eastern exposure. Each room has large windows with a view of trees, grass and, of course, snow in winter. Two rooms have a wonderful view of Holy Rosary Cathedral (a local landmark) and the others look onto an older Regina streetscape. Each room has a child-sized washroom attached; this was the only renovation made to the classrooms when the Early Learning Centre moved into this building, which was formerly a high school and then an adult education centre.

The details of the decoration in each room are different but there are many similarities. All the former adult height chalkboards and notice boards are covered with brightly coloured paper. Generally, the displays consist of a photo of each child with his/her name, photos of outings and classroom events, samples of children's work and pictures to illustrate the themes being studied. The environment of each room is enlivened by the addition of "living things" such as plants and pets; for instance, one room not only has plants and a colourful aquarium but a miniature rabbit also scampers among the children as they work.

Daily Schedule in the Classrooms

Arrival Time	8:45 - 9:00 a.m. 12:45 - 1:00 p.m.	Teachers greet children, help with coats, etc. Children go to the mat for Circle Time.
Circle Time	9:00 - 9:15 1:00 - 1:15	Hello song, Weather, Calendar, Attendance, Song, Verse, Story related to theme. Talk about centre activities. Planning and choosing an activity centre.
Centre Activity Time	9:15 - 10:20 1:15 - 2:20	Children choose an activity centre. Teachers guide and work with children. Language Program carried out informally.
Bathroom and Wash-up	10:20 - 10:35 2:20 - 2:35	Children put away activities and tidy up. They wash their hands in preparation for snack.
Snack time	10:35 - 10:55 2:35 - 2:55	
Storytime (song, verse story, game)	10:55 - 11:15 2:55 - 3:15	
Gross Motor Activities or Outdoor Play	11:15 - 11:30 3:15 - 3:30	
Dismissal	11:30 3:30	

Monday: Speech and Language
Tuesday: Field Trips
Wednesday: students (SIFC); Library (p.m.)
Thursday: Music; Library

The visitor to the classrooms is greeted by an informal domestic atmosphere. Gentle music often plays as the children work; and, in addition to the expected preschool activities, each has a corner with a big easy chair, a rug and cushions. In this, and in other nooks around the room, is found respite for the child who wants to spend some time alone.

Otherwise, each classroom is laid out as a set of activity centres which allow the children choice and an opportunity to engage in active learning. In interviews with me, teachers have named the 19 centres listed below as desirable options:

writing centre	listening centre	playhouse
block centre	book centre	dress up
carpentry centre	puppet centre	gym
sand centre	art centre	table top activities
water centre	play dough centre	pre-number centre
science centre	computer centre	
music centre	dramatic play centre	

However, because of space restrictions in the classroom, and to provide the children with structure on certain occasions, all of these centres are not always available to the children. In addition, centres are chosen according to the theme being explored, for example, some themes lend themselves much more readily to scientific experimentation. However, on all of the occasions that I visited the classrooms, the following core seemed to be available:

sand and/or water	writing centre
playhouse or some modifications, e.g., hospital	art or painting centre
book centre or library corner	block centre
listening centre	fine motor activities

For at least an hour each day during the activity period, children choose their own activity and regulate their transition from one activity area to the next. Among other skills, they learn to negotiate, to share and to take turns at centres and to leave the place tidy for the next children. Children learn to expect the school day to follow a regular sequence of events. Although in practice it is very flexible, all classrooms follow the same basic timetable (see previous page).

A period can be lengthened or shortened depending on the children's attention span or the natural rhythm of an activity. In some rooms children are free to come and eat their snack when they are hungry or are finished their activity; in others, the whole class eats their snack together.

The structure of the school day and the layout of the classrooms have all the prerequisites necessary to achieve the curriculum objectives of fostering curiosity and a sense of wonder in the children, as well as developing the child's language, independence and competence.

CURRICULUM

> Effective preschool programs use explicitly stated, developmentally appropriate active-learning curricula that support children's self-initiated learning activities. (Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart, 1993, p. 17)

> Despite the animated controversy which has revolved around curriculum design and content, the research that I have reviewed indicates that the "perfect preschool curriculum" does not exist. This conclusion coincides with the result of some of my early findings at the Early Learning Centre: observations of the children in the classrooms and feedback from parents seems to indicate that the important ingredient is not curriculum content, but the social relations that are established while the curriculum is being implemented. (See Appendix 3)

The above is an excerpt from the first quarterly report that I submitted to the Muttart Foundation after spending three months at the Centre looking over curriculum material, discussing it with the staff, and visiting the classrooms. Now, having spent two years at the Early Learning Centre, I still think that how teachers interact with the children and families is the crucial pivot around which the curriculum revolves. By striving to create a community through showing respect for staff members, children and families, the curriculum is transformed and lived.

At the Early Learning Centre, the staff constantly discuss what they are doing in their classrooms. They do this informally, but they also have a time set aside each month to pool curriculum resources and to discuss each other's plans. The groundwork for the curriculum is established at the beginning of each school year when the teachers and associates set their goals for the year in accordance with the Centre's goals and objectives. The curriculum is not written as a single unit but exists in various documents and, most importantly, in teachers' beliefs and practices. In this respect, it can be described as a "curriculum of consensus." This consensus is based on the existing curriculum and traditions within the school, as well as on the knowledge that is gained through the teachers' on-going professional development, the changes due to practical considerations (what has worked), and the changes caused by how the children reacted to previous plans. This consensus is constantly emerging as the teachers make adjustments to accommodate their evolving understanding, and new ideas about curriculum and how young children learn best.

The adjusted curriculum then becomes the plan for the new school year and is again readjusted in each monthly planning meeting. Even so, it is never implemented precisely as planned as it is impossible to predict exactly how the children will interpret certain themes, activities and projects. The process of curriculum change and realignment is ongoing.

In fact, this is one of the remarkable features of the Early Learning Centre. The staff and the administration are very open to learning new ideas, eager to improve the learning opportuni-

ties of the children and to keep their teaching fresh by experimenting and innovating. For example, as a result of the present project, several changes were made. Since the research design involves participatory action research, as the project progressed I was able to observe what was happening in the program and discuss transcripts of my observations with the Director and the teachers. I then organized workshops when the teachers felt that they needed help to implement the changes. The following are some of the changes that were made as a result of this evaluation:

1. *Decoration of the entrance hall and hallways:* At the beginning of this project, although classrooms were being decorated to reflect what was happening in them, the hallways were practically bare. As a result of a trip that I made to the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, in June 1993, I became aware of the gap this created between the world of the classroom and the community. Activities being carried on in the classroom did not extend beyond the door and parents and visitors coming into the Centre learned little of the school until they entered a classroom. To get this project underway, I employed an Arts Education student who coordinated the teachers' ideas and helped them to get started. Now the teachers keep up that project on their own.

2. *Setting up a gym:* As a result of traveling on the school buses, I realized that some of the children probably had little opportunity for gross motor activity, especially during the winter. In addition, having a fully equipped gym in the preschool would be an excellent way to allow children to burn off excess energy and then be better able to concentrate on their classroom work. After considering my suggestion, the Director set about renting another room in the building. The staff then began to research the most suitable equipment for young children and to estimate the costs. The equipment and mats were bought when the Executive Director received the Fellowship of Man Award, which included a cash donation to the Centre. In order to use the gym safely and effectively, the staff attended workshops and practiced using the equipment themselves.

3. *Adjusting classroom practice:* The discussions and workshops that I held with the teachers heightened their awareness of their practice and I noticed that they became more observant, especially in the following areas:

   - helping the children to plan which activities to choose before Centre Time everyday. Child planning is one of the notable features of the highly successful High/Scope preschool curriculum.
   - engaging children in conversation by following their lead and helping them to expand on what they are saying rather than constantly asking them questions.
   - observing and interpreting children's early literacy behaviour including their scribbling, drawings, and early attempts at writing.
   - changing the system of reporting to parents to have reports more closely reflect what actually happens in the classroom. Starting in June 1993, the parents received a letter telling what their child had learned in his/her year at the preschool. This letter was based on a checklist that the teachers and I devised together. I used an earlier version of this checklist to categorize classroom observation. A sample of the checklist is included in Appendix 7.

This spirit of openness and willingness to change is spearheaded by the Executive Director. Her own intellectual curiosity motivates the staff; she provides them with in-service on site and also provides a modest amount of funds for them to attend conferences. Staff who go to the conferences generally report back on what they have learned so that all can benefit.

Because the curriculum is constantly evolving and because there is no comprehensive, theory-based curriculum document, it is somewhat hard to define. Although the Director and teachers know that they are doing a good job, there is still a slight embarrassment whenever

outsiders ask to see their curriculum; in response to this request, they are usually invited to "come and see what we do and then stay and talk to us." Writing a curriculum takes time and resources which are not easily available to the Early Learning Centre staff, and the more pressing day-to-day needs of the children take precedence. I learned about the curriculum by following the teachers' advice — I talked to the Director and teachers, I observed in the classrooms, I held workshops with the staff helping them to define their notion of the curriculum, and I asked them to complete questionnaires.

In responding to questionnaires, the teachers showed that, in agreement with research results (Schweinhart et al.,1993), they believe in developmentally appropriate active learning which supports and guides the child's own initiative. In response to the question, "What are some of the most important things children learn at the Early Learning Centre?" one teacher wrote: "[Children learn] that they are appreciated, loved, cared for and safe... and by experiencing patient encouragement to explore the school environment, they become more curious and adventurous. They learn that they are free to try new things and enjoy new relationships and friendships with others."

Another question about how preschoolers learn best highlighted further aspects of the teachers' beliefs. The first response of the entire staff was "through play"; but teachers also said young children learn in the following ways: "in a hands-on fashion," "active doing," "experiencing and observing," "interacting with other children," "experimenting," "taking charge of their own learning," and "by learning to have pride in themselves and their heritage." That effective learning is child-centred is clearly one of the cornerstones of the teachers' beliefs.

At the year-end review meeting in June 1994, the staff arrived at a consensus about the meaning of "child-centred." This consensus was reached as a result of a structured discussion initiated by the Executive Director asking each teacher and teacher associate to say what "child-centred" meant to her in her classroom. The discussion began by people stating "what it is not": to them it did not mean "having a chaotic or free-for-all classroom" or "following a pre-set curriculum rigidly." Finally, the teachers felt that a child-centred curriculum is neither "stagnant nor restrictive." In contrast, they thought that to be child-centred meant the following role for the teacher:

- interacting with the child in a very sensitive way so as to understand the child's frame of reference;
- helping the child to change by modifying his/her behaviour patterns but not changing the child's personality;
- following the child's pace and not imposing the teacher's plans rigidly;
- discovering the child's interests and provoking further interest by questioning and commenting;
- helping children explore and discover answers by supplying materials and steering them in fruitful directions;
- providing help and encouragement;
- approaching the child as competent and curious, not as an "empty vessel" to fill;
- seeing every child's strengths in order to build self-esteem;
- providing a stimulating environment to whet the child's curiosity and to extend his/her interests.

Discussions like this about aspects of the curriculum help to maintain some "quality control" and ensure that children in each of the four rooms have a roughly similar experience. When teachers are recruited, a detailed interview helps to ensure that only teachers who share the Centre's philosophy

are hired. In spite of this general consensus, teachers do feel a sense of ownership or control over what they do in their own classrooms. Teachers vary their practice according to their particular beliefs and readiness to adopt a particular idea. For example, some rooms are more teacher-directed than others and put more emphasis on helping children learn specific pre-literacy tasks. However, because of the emphasis on professional development, both teachers' beliefs and classroom interactions are constantly evolving. Highlighting this, the Executive Director told me, "We know what we want and we are always on a journey towards that ideal."

Writers in curriculum often categorize curricula according to the source of the information used to describe them; for instance Goodlad (1979) contrasts the "ideological" or "ideal" curriculum with the "operational" curriculum. In the discussion above, however, I drew on both sources of information — the "ideal" or what the teachers believe they would like the curriculum to be, and the "operational" or what actually happens in the day-to-day life of the classroom. In my observations and subsequent analysis and reflection, I did not find a big discrepancy between the two. There is, of course, some "slippage" between what the teachers would like to happen in their classrooms and their ideas. But that there is so little is to be commended, considering the constant demands on the teachers' time and energy.

Curriculum Documents

Research has shown that "effective programs are explicitly stated" (Schweinhart et al., 1993, p. 17). Although the Early Learning Centre does not have a detailed written curriculum, it does have a mission statement, detailed goals and objectives, and a handbook for parents which lays out the program, the Centre's beliefs about how children learn and some of its expectations for children and parents. In addition to these, the school also makes use of three curriculum documents. The most important of these is the Centre's own "Theme Handbook."

For the past few years the curriculum content has been organized as themes. This has been to provide an integrated approach to the teaching of concepts and skills; the focus is on the theme rather than skills. With the coming of the Whole Language approach, this orientation to curriculum presentation became very popular in the schools, and the introduction to the "Theme Handbook" consists of material from a workshop on "Theme Building." The introduction also contains the following statement by Marlene and Robert McCracken:

> Themes are about ideas; themes are ways of developing concepts; themes are thoughts ... the theme is the glue that integrates otherwise unrelated, irrelevant skills and practice drills ... the development of themes is the heart of a language program.

The teachers have found that themes add more interest to planning and organizing the environment and a variety of experiences for the children; teachers agree that themes give a certain amount of security and structure but can be fluid and flexible in use. They are more in tune with a child-centred active learning type of approach than an hierarchically organized list of concepts, skills and behaviours that children should learn.

The "Theme Handbook" has been developed by the teachers and represents the accumulated knowledge gained as each theme is tried out in the classroom; in other words, the information collected in this resource book is what has worked for teachers in previous years. An example of how a theme is developed is illustrated at the end of this section. The first step in developing a theme is to create a web of related activities and content in all subjects, e.g., language, dramatic play, health and science. In the accompanying theme-building section, each of these related activities is developed listing helpful resources such as books. For each activity the concepts and skills to be learned are also given. Some of the concepts and skills which teachers hope children will learn at the various centres are also spelled out.

In keeping with the discussion in the previous section, the teachers insist that the set of 25

themes in the handbook acts simply as a very loose, flexible guide or resource manual to help structure the year: "They are there in case we need them." They need not be carried out in any particular order. Another way of viewing a theme is as a set of possibilities — until the theme is presented to the children, the teacher will not know how they react to it. Because of different learning styles teachers try to present information in many different ways. For instance, some children learn very well when concepts and skills are introduced informally; some learn to write their name by copying it from their belongings while others must be enticed in a more direct way to take an interest in letters.

The teachers say that their thinking about themes has changed over the past few years: "Now we are far more flexible in how we follow plans; we often develop ideas that come up on the spur of the moment, try something new, observe and evaluate it as it goes. Themes allow variety and structure in the classroom but the child is still free to become involved in the activities of their choice.

Four other changes that I have observed in how themes are handled over the past year all involve the more active participation of the children. The first change allows the children a greater role in planning new themes and helping to prepare the room, for example, turning the house corner into a restaurant for a theme on food. The second change is allowing for more spontaneous child-directed activity, for example, scrap materials are made available and children are encouraged to make their own models, cards, and so forth. The teacher assists the children when necessary but does not present them preselected and prepared materials. The third change involves encouraging more group work by having the children come together to plan an activity, for example, the construction of a castle from old cardboard cylinders and boxes. The fourth change involves the amount of time devoted to each theme. The teachers are now much more flexible in deciding how much time is planned for each theme: a theme can last from a few days up to a few weeks and some themes such as "snow" can last for several months alongside other major themes. Experience and observation determines the duration and elaboration of themes.

Besides the "Theme Handbook," the teachers use two other resources in planning. *Early Bird: A Collection of Early Learning Resources* (McInnes, Dixon and Ryckman, 1990) is designed as a set of resources to help teachers "develop appropriate early childhood programs for particular settings" (p. 3). It is designed as a set of themes. Each theme consists of resources and ideas for theme development, including a set of children's literature and big books. The design is flexible so that teachers can pick and choose from the kit to suit their plans. The Early Learning Centre teachers feel that it is a valuable source of ideas: "We know what is in it and it is easy to lay our hands on resources when we need them."

The philosophy behind the choice and arrangement of material in the *Early Bird* is consistent with that of the Early Learning Centre: "children learn through active and direct involvement with their world, ... play is fundamental to children's growth and learning and ... in enabling environments, literacy emerges early" (McInnes, Dixon and Ryckman, 1990; p. 3). The *Early Bird* collection is consistent with the ethos of the Early Learning Centre in another way: it is designed to foster and assist in collaborative program planning and it includes materials to keep parents informed about what is happening at school as well as suggestions to involve them. At the moment, the teachers use the ideas and resources from this curriculum kit to supplement their theme planning.

The other resource which is used in program planning is the "Neyhiyawetan Curriculum" designed by the Cultural College in Saskatoon. Teachers use this material informally to teach the children some Cree words and phrases each week. This curriculum is supplemented by collecting Native Legends. Some years ago at the Centre, Cree was taught in a more systematic

and formal manner. However, over the past few years, because of staff changes, the program was not delivered as intensely. The Executive Director and the staff would like to remedy this situation. Their plan to implement an incidental but systematic program for the teaching of a Native language will be discussed in one of the following sections.

SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND MUSIC PROGRAMS

Because many of the children come to the Centre with speech and language skills well below the expected norm, one of the principal objectives of the program is the development of children's language. Developing children's communication skills is an integral part of all activities and is usually carried out incidentally. However, some children with severely delayed language or speech problems require specialized help. This assistance is supplied by a speech pathologist from the Saskatchewan Child and Youth Services who visits the school each week. In her work, she supplements the teachers' efforts by carrying out a more in-depth diagnosis on children identified by the teachers, by suggesting new techniques and activities to be carried out in the classroom, and by working individually with some children.

In addition to the speech pathologist, a music therapist also works with the program for a half day a week. She works directly with the children in order to increase the use of music, movement and drama in the school. Being a specialist with particular talents and training, she is able to stimulate the children's creativity and expose them to a wide variety of rhythmic and musical experiences. Links are made through these artistic experiences to other aspects of the curriculum. The music therapist believes that "creativity as used in all of the arts is a means of teaching communication, socialization, creative problem solving, a confidence in one's own abilities no matter what learning level the child may have."

The staff value the contributions of these two specialists and at the end of the 1994 school year decided that they wanted to make better use of their services by integrating their work more fully into the classroom program. As a result, the speech pathologist and the music therapist were invited to participate in the program review meetings in June. Along with the Executive Director and the teachers, they were able to plan for the upcoming year. The teachers had some requests. For example, they would like parents to become more involved in language programming for their child, and they would like to have the music therapist give them some in-service so that they can continue some of her activities throughout the week. Together everyone at the meeting helped work out practical details of timetables and schedules to make these adjustments.

ABORIGINAL CONTENT AND FOCUS IN THE PROGRAM

As is mentioned in several places in this report, the Early Learning Centre has a program that is culturally sensitive to the background of Native children and families. This is confirmed by the perceptions of parents and their eagerness to send their children to the Centre. The program, however, is not a strictly Aboriginal program or "culturally appropriate," as the term is defined by Morrissette, McKenzie and Morrissette (1993). These authors suggest that four principles are key in culturally appropriate practice:

- recognition of a distinct aboriginal worldview;
- development of aboriginal consciousness about the impact of colonialism;
- the use of cultural knowledge and traditions as an active component of retaining aboriginal identity and collective consciousness;
- empowerment as an outcome of the methods advocated by the program.

In these terms, culturally appropriate practice is ultimately an attempt to undo the wrongs of colonialism by giving back to Native people their identity and the values which were taken

from them. The aims of the Early Learning Centre are less radical, and the program could not aim at being culturally appropriate in this more political sense for a variety of reasons including:

1. Although 80% of the children attending are Native, the Centre is not a Native preschool.
2. Even if the school policy changed, it would be very difficult for the non-Native staff to implement a culturally appropriate curriculum; to become thoroughly familiar with another worldview takes a lot of knowledge of that culture. In addition, many of the Centre's Native staff are only now trying to regain their own culture and therefore do not feel they know enough to design and implement such a curriculum.
3. Some Native parents, in answering a questionnaire on Aboriginal content in the curriculum, indicated that they did not want their children to learn anything about "Native Religion." They wanted Native culture separated from religion. Clearly, all Native parents would be willing to accept a "culturally appropriate" Native curriculum.

Although the Executive Director and teachers do not feel that they are equipped to be the main source of cultural knowledge for the children, they are aware of the importance of exposing them at a young age to their heritage. Research has shown that by age four children are aware of racial differences. At the same time, or very soon after, they form judgments about the relative prestige or worth of their own race in comparison to others (see Cole and Cole, 1993, for a summary of this research).

Many of the Centre's teaching practices fit very well with Native American child-rearing practices. In the classrooms, it is clear that much of the learning is through play, where children become involved voluntarily in a variety of experiences with other children and their teachers or by themselves. Children are also allowed to observe and not participate until they feel comfortable to enter a new situation. Considerable emphasis is also placed on getting the children to reach a consensus; teachers try to avoid imposing decisions, rules and regulations on them. As far as possible, teachers try to run their rooms in a calm and harmonious way: harmony and consensus seem to be two of the key values in traditional Native American cultures.

The two key values of mutuality and respect also describe how teachers treat all children, even "challenging" or misbehaving children. Children are always listened to and teachers spend time "to be with" quiet children. I have observed that although teachers are not conscious that they do this, they communicate with quiet children in a variety of ways — playing alongside them, sitting with them and looking at a book or giving them a hug. Again, in many Native cultures silence is valued in communication.

Apart from the general ethos in the rooms and in the school, many more specific things are done to show Native children's cultural heritage is valued. The school has an honourary Elder who participates in school events and carries out ritual purification using sweetgrass. She also has her dancing troupe perform at the Centre's Mini-Mosaic. Many of the decorations in the hallways honour Aboriginal cultures: display cases show samples of beadwork and a banner of an eagle adorns the main stairwell.

In addition to the physical surroundings, many class themes and activities are specifically drawn from Aboriginal culture. Teachers also make every effort to understand the children's reality and to provide children with the opportunity to talk about their experiences, such as, powwows and visits to grandparents on the reserves. Cree vocabulary is also used in all the classrooms: grandparents are referred to as *Kokum* and *Mushum*; when projects are carried out on animals the children learn the animal name in Cree, for example, *amisk*, the beaver. Teachers have daily outings involving Cree, such as counting the children who are present both in English and in Cree.

Perhaps because of the discussion generated by this research project, the teachers approach on how to bring Native culture into their classrooms has changed. Their understanding of what is meant by having a "culture" evolved and they began to understand culture more as a way of seeing or relating to the world rather than simply concerning material artifacts. This was reflected in how they began to incorporate Native content and styles of interaction into their on-going teaching. Before this their approach to Native culture was more a case of all or nothing with an emphasis on the material aspects, for example, the theme, for one week was culture where the children did many crafts and activities with a Native flavour. If the former approach could be described as tending toward folklore, this approach is far more realistic and less romanticized.

Aboriginal Curriculum Content: The Way Forward

As part of this evaluation, I spoke to several people within Regina's Aboriginal community in addition to the parents, to ask their opinion on how best to bring more cultural content into the curriculum. One prominent Regina Elder's advice was to examine what the Centre is doing well at the moment and build on that. She also added, "There are many things that you people are doing well."

"Building on what is being done successfully" was the intention of a series of four workshops organized as part of this evaluation. The topic of one of these was the Cree Curriculum. Solomon Ratt of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College discussed the curriculum and demonstrated methods of making the teaching of Cree more concrete and interactive. Following this workshop, the staff agreed on the following policy statements concerning the teaching of Cree:

1. The Early Learning Centre has enough resources for teachers to get started and/or continue to teach Cree.
2. The Centre has adequate validity from research, from its own practice over the years, and from the community to categorically state that it is very important for Aboriginal children to be exposed to their language.
3. Language is a crucial component of culture. All children, even non-Native, will benefit from exposure to a second language.

As part of that discussion several other issues came to the fore: the teachers' language competence and confidence; developing language resources suitable for teaching young children; utilizing Cree syllabics more visibly, as in the newsletters and in the hallway displays; and engaging the parents in the Cree program, such as having a language corner in the parents' resource room. The teachers also decided on a plan of action to ensure that language teaching was addressed in a more formal manner in the coming years. The plan included the following points:

- examine the possibility of having a Cree course at the Centre for both staff and parents;
- meet at a set time each week to discuss what activities were successful in introducing Cree into the classroom and together plan experiences for the following week;
- initiative would be taken in this teaching by the partner who felt most competent and comfortable about language teaching.

A similar procedure could also be followed concerning the melding of other aspects of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and values into the curriculum. The Executive Director should continue to invite resource people to engage the teachers in discussion to help them better understand various key aspects of a Native American worldview. The staff and resource person could then devise methods suitable for a preschool context. These methods could be piloted and, if successful, would become part of the regular program.

To learn more about Native culture, the staff could periodically read and discuss authors like Brown (1990) and Ross (1992). "Harmony with nature" is an example of a value that might come from such reading, discussion and reflection. In order to deepen their understanding teachers could analyze what they are doing already and then look for better ways to introduce the new concepts more effectively and holistically. Children could learn about topics like herbs and healing; they could also learn about the animals and how they supplied the people with most of their basic needs. Native people had to kill the animals but they always prayed to the animal's spirit in order to redress the harmony that had been broken.

Native Americans had a pragmatic approach to nature. They had to use it in order to survive but they were also very respectful of its bounty, fragility and power. It is important that a realistic and unsentimental portrait of Native culture be given to the children; these cultural images must be robust and resilient and become part of the protection that will help these preschoolers keep their self-esteem intact in a difficult world.

The next section will attempt to bring all the elements of the classroom program to life by describing the "lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990) of two typical preschool children during a day at the Centre.

THE CURRICULUM IN ACTION: THE CHILD'S EXPERIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

Over the past two years, I have spent many full days in each of the classrooms, sometimes as a participant observer, sometimes in a more formal capacity as an observer taking detailed notes of the classroom activities and interactions. My own observations are supplemented by the observations of two research assistants who spent 20 full days in the classrooms. During this time 16 children were observed; these observations consisted of a detailed record of how a particular child spent his/her time, with whom s/he interacted and what s/he said. Sixteen children (four in each room) were observed as three-year-olds and as four-year-olds. The observations were analyzed in terms of language development, socio-emotional development, literacy development and cognitive development; an emphasis was also put on teacher-child and child-child interactions (Katz, 1993).

In order to convey something of the life and atmosphere in the classrooms, the essence of these observations will be captured by following two children as they spend a typical day at the Early Learning Centre. These portraits are composites of all the observations carried out by myself and my research assistants.

In reviewing the data and constructing these portraits of two typical children, I wanted to capture a cross-section of the children who attend the Early Learning Centre. In order to do this, I created one portrait of Anita and another of Kevin. Anita is a child from a relatively stable home who has benefited greatly from the extra language stimulation, educational experiences, daily routine and structure, and even-tempered, warm relationships with her teachers. Kevin has also benefited from attending the Early Learning Centre. In fact, the preschool probably represents a stable island in his otherwise shaky world. His behaviour, however, is more challenging for the teachers and his portrait attempts to show some of their behaviour-management techniques. Taken together, both portraits attempt to show the flow of the school day and the interactions and learning that take place in the classroom.

In attempting to condense my observations into two portraits, I run the risk of stereotyping: this I acknowledge. I also hesitated before choosing to represent the "easy" child as a girl and the more "challenging" child as a boy; however, after consulting with the teachers I decided to go ahead. Over the years the teachers have found that more boys than girls show aggressive and challenging behaviour.

Anita's Day at the Early Learning Centre

It is 8:20 a.m. on a snowy morning in February. Anita stands by the window at home with her two younger brothers. Her older brother is searching for a book which he needs to return to kindergarten. This is Anita's second year at the Early Learning Centre so she is familiar with the routine. The older of her two younger brothers is almost three and his name is on the waiting list; his mother hopes that he will get a place before the end of the year so that he can begin his apprenticeship at the Early Learning Centre while Anita is still attending there. Next year she will be in kindergarten.

The children see the Centre's van coming down the street and before it has time to pull up outside the house they shout to tell their mother that it has arrived. She quickly helps Anita zip her snowsuit and then waves through the window to the driver. As Anita comes down her sidewalk to the van she is greeted by Marg, the driver, "Hi Anita, you got a new toque." As Marg opens the van door for her, Anita begins to tell her about her new acquisition, "My mom buyed it for me. She buyed it at Superstore."[3] Anita finds a place between two other children in the second row. After some hunting to find the seat belt, Anita buckles up. Now, the driver and the children set off to collect the remaining children.

Along the way, the children chat to each other; it is early so some, especially the three-year-olds, are still sleepy. Marg points out some things along the way to the children sitting closest to her, "That sign says 'stop', so we have to wait until all is clear before I can cross this street."

Their van is the second to arrive at the Centre this morning. When it pulls up, Marg opens the doors and they are met by Carol, one of their teachers from the orange room.[4] She greets each child by name and then waits as they get themselves organized in a more-or-less straight line. Carol comments on the blue sky, the bright snow and the cold wind as they walk into the school.

In the hallway, the children scramble to take off their jackets, snowsuits and winter boots. Anita is able to unzip her suit and hangs it in her locker, "Good job Anita. You have put everything away very tidily." At this stage Marg, the driver, is also helping the children undress and reminding them to put away their belongings. As each child is ready, s/he goes into the classroom where Tanya, the other teacher, is waiting to greet them.

Before she leaves the hallway, Anita complains, "Hey, teacher, Jonathan throwed his boots on the floor."

"You tell him what to do Anita. Perhaps you could show him how you put yours away."

Anita intercepts Jonathan before he goes in the classroom door and reluctantly he goes back with her towards the boots lying on the floor. Now the teacher joins them and asks Jonathan where his boots should be. Anita opens the locker door, Carol takes one boot, Jonathan the other; everything is in order so Anita heads for the classroom.

"Good morning Anita. How are you?" Tanya, the second teacher, who is waiting in the orange room, greets each child as s/he comes into the room. Anita tells Tanya about her new toque and then Tanya asks her about the colour. Anita replies:

"Lots and lots of different colours."

The class's daily routine will begin presently with *Circle Time*. This takes place in a carpeted corner where the teacher's low armchair sits facing the centre of the room. The children who got

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3 This linguistic feature of regularizing irregular verbs is typical of four-year-olds.

4 This is a fictitious room name.

into the room first are putting the laminated place mats, which the children made for themselves in September, in a circle around the teacher's chair.

Anita walks slowly towards the circle, taking a few moments to examine the new pictures of snowflakes on the science table. Carol, the teacher, is already sitting in her chair. Tanya goes quietly to Anita and says, "You can look at those interesting pictures of snowflakes some more later. Now, it is Circle Time." Anita finds her mat and sits on it. She sits cross-legged, looks around and then says to herself, "Jenna and Denny are beside me."

Circle Time begins as the teacher in the chair, Carol, calls the children to attention by saying "Good morning children, Tansi." "Tansi" is the Cree word for "Hello." Meanwhile, Tanya is sitting in the circle near two children who tend to be disruptive. Together teachers and children singalong with the Early Learning Centre's Cree welcome song — "Tansi Children." The focus for today is snow and some of its properties. At the moment in the Orange Room, there are two themes overlapping: winter and snow. "Winter" is an umbrella theme that has been running all semester but within it several sub-themes, such as snow and animals in winter, highlight certain aspects of winter.

Carol asks the children what they saw covering the ground as they came to school. She involves them in a conversation about the uses of snow: it covers the ground and shelters the plants from the cold wind. One child adds that it also "Keeps the animals warm." This leads to a conversation about animals who hibernate. Anita says, "The bear sleeps under the snow." To end the circle time, teachers and children together sing some songs and jingles about snow. The class also stands up as the children sing an action song and then sit back down again for a few minutes of planning.

The teacher names the child who will be the helper for the day; the helper will set the table for the snack and make an extra effort during tidy-up time to get the room in order for the next children. After this, Thomas, today's helper, counts the children: he goes around the circle and points to the children as everyone in the room counts in English and in Cree. The teacher then says that it would be a good idea to find out exactly how many boys and girls were at school today. The helper then counts the girls and the teacher asks Anita to come up and take a red "Duplo" cube for each boy and a yellow one for each girl. Today the towers of "Duplo" are almost even: five girls and six boys. One boy is absent; usually there are seven boys and five girls. After this exercise in graphing, the teacher asks the children to close their eyes and to plan what they will do during *Activity Time*. The teacher tells them to make pictures in their heads and to see themselves working at the centre they have chosen. Anita sits quietly and keeps her eyes closed. Before the minute is up many other children are peeking and are restless. When the teacher says, "Go quietly to your activities" Anita gets up and stands in the middle of the room looking around. She sees Maria who seems to be walking towards the easels and says to her:

"Maria, do you want to play in the house with me?"

"Yeah, let's play sick babies."

The two four-year-olds head towards the house with a confident air but when they get there Jonathan is rummaging in one of the cupboards.

"Hey, Jonathan what you doing?"

In reply three-year-old Jonathan simply looks at them.

"O.K. you can be the daddy."

"You want some coffee?"

Jonathan nods in reply and Maria puts a cup on the table and says to him,

"Here, sit down and drink your coffee."

Meanwhile, Anita has found two big dolls, one white and one brown, and is sitting them down on a low bench in the corner. She has also found a snowsuit, scarf and two blankets.

"O.K., these babies are very sick."

To which Maria adds a query:

"You want me to phone the doctor?"

Maria picks up the phone:

"Hello doctor, our babies are very sick."

Anita interjects,

"Tell him can we bring them to see him now."

Maria puts down the receiver and says,

"Let's go."

They busily bundle up the babies in scarves and blankets and even though they continue to make comments about how cold it is outside, they do not get dressed up themselves. As they are about to leave the house corner, Maria looks over at Jonathan and says in a commanding voice,

"Dad, you want to come with us to the doctor's?"

The two girls with Jonathan in tow walk around the room a few times avoiding other children working on floor puzzles and playing with a block construction that juts out into the centre of the room. Finally, they arrive at the doctor's office. which is really the table and chairs in the house corner. Anita announces,

"This is the doctor's"

Maria adds,

"Yes, we are here, at last!"

The three children seem slightly at a loss for what to do. The girls sit on the chairs and wrap the babies' blankets more tightly around them. Jonathan stands quietly to the side. Carol, their teacher, arrives. She knocks on the back of the divider.

"Knock, knock anybody home?"

"Yes, come in."

"I see that you have just come back from a walk with your babies."

"No, we just bringed them to the doctor's."

"Oh, I see this is the doctor's office. Would you like me to be the receptionist?"

Carol takes a chair and sits behind the table.

"Hello, I'm the doctor's receptionist. Before you see the doctor, I must ask you a few questions. Is that O.K.?"

"Yes."

Carol takes a small pad of paper and pencil from her pocket.

"O.K., I will ask you these questions and write the answers."

"Maria, what is your baby's name?"

"Anita what is your baby's name?"

The teacher writes the children's replies and then continues,

"Would you like to see the doctor right away or would you like an appointment for later?"

Maria answers,

"Right away."

But Anita replies,

"Later."

The teacher-receptionist then says,

"Alright Maria, you take a chair and wait. The doctor will see you very soon. Here is a magazine to read while you are waiting."

Carol leans over into the book display and takes a book and passes it to Maria as a pretend magazine. Then she addresses Anita,

"O.K. Anita when would you like an appointment for your baby, this afternoon or tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow."

"Yes, there is an opening at 11:00 a.m. tomorrow. Wait, I want to write that on an appointment card for you."

The teacher tears a piece of paper from her pad and writes, "Baby Lucy, Wed. 11:00 a.m."

Anita takes her piece of paper and wanders off with her baby. Meanwhile, Carol, the teacher, continues to play with Maria and Jonathan. She involves Jonathan, the dad, and asks him a few simple questions about his baby.

Anita stands in the middle of the room and looks around — probably trying to decide what she will do next. Her eyes again wander towards the colourful display of pictures of snowflakes and books about ice and snow. She wanders over there and begins to look at a book when she becomes interested in a group who are working with Tanya, the other teacher, at a nearby table. They are weighing ice and snow and comparing the weights. The teacher is writing the children's words on a chart: "Ice is the heaviest, it made the scales go very low."

Anita does not participate in this activity, she simply watches with interest. After watching for a few minutes, she walks to the other end of the room close to the easels and the writing centre. As it is near to Valentine's Day, there are materials laid out for making cards and letters for their family and friends. Two children are already at work pasting snowflakes on cards and drawing hearts and "writing" their names. Anita says,

"I'll write my mom a card."

She puts baby on the floor and pulls out a chair and sits down.

"I'll make a green card with a happy face."

She takes a piece of green paper, folds it in two, and with a blue marker draws a big happy face and then a smaller one beside it.

"This is me and this is my mom. She is happy."

Her teacher, Tanya, comes by,

"I see that you are busy making a card but I don't think your baby is too pleased to be on the

floor. I think she is frightened that someone might kick her by accident. Where do you think she would feel safest?"

"In bed."

"You go and tuck her in bed and I'll wait here for you."

Anita goes off to put the doll back in the house corner. When she is there she watches another boy and girl who are cooking soup. Meanwhile Tanya chats to the other two children at the writing centre about the cards they are making. When Anita arrives back she takes her card and starts to write her name. Tanya turns to her and says,

"I see that you have drawn two happy faces and have written your name. Can you tell me about what you have done?"

Anita says,

"I made a card for my mom. I drawed two happy faces. One is me and one is my mom."

"Did you do anything else?"

"I writed my name."

"Anita would you like me to write that for you? Then you can keep the story about your card with the happy faces in your binder to read later on in the year."

The teacher takes a piece of paper and asks Anita to dictate her story. When she has finished writing Anita's story for her, she says,

"Now, Anita, you have a little time left before snack time, what would you like to do? Do some more writing?"

"No."

"Alright, let's see — there is an easel free or you could play with some puzzles..."

Before the teacher can finish Anita blurts out,

"I want to paint a picture."

Anita runs and puts on a plastic painting apron and immediately starts to paint vertical stripes using all the colours in the stand. When this is done she uses black paint to draw a person who fills the right-hand side of the paper. Unlike the drawings on her card, the face is not happy but has a straight, neutral mouth. As she puts the finishing touches to her painting, tidy-up time is announced.

Slowly, she puts her apron away and goes to sit and wait for the signal to go to the bathroom and wash her hands for snack. One of the teachers comes and asks her to go to the house and help with the tidy-up because she played there earlier. During tidy-up, Thomas, the helper for the day, sets the table for snack: he puts out each child's personalized place mat and places a glass and a napkin on each. While Anita was busy at the writing centre, the cook had brought in the day's snack.

When the children have washed their hands, one of the teachers brings the food around and allows the children to select what they would like. Anita chooses celery, carrot sticks, bread with peanut butter and a quarter of an orange. During snack, she chats with Alexis and tells her about her new toque. Then she and Alexis get involved in exchanging scary stories with the two boys who are sitting opposite them. One of the teachers, Tanya, sits at the next table and chats with the seven other children. After snack, like all the other children, Anita cleans up her place, puts away her mat, puts her glass on the wash-up tray and throws her peels and napkin in the garbage. Then she goes to the book corner, finds a book and starts to read it through: first she

takes, *A Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats and then *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. Anita pages through the text and says at the appropriate pages: "He eated through one apple, But he was still hungry. He eated through two pears. But he was still hungry." She continues in a similar vein until the end of the book.

When Carol, the teacher, returns from her coffee break, she looks around to make sure that snack is tidied away and then she goes to the chair in the story corner. (This is the same chair that was used earlier for *Circle Time*.) The children continue to "read" books and to chat quietly to each other and Carol also reads a book although she has to get up to go and talk to two children, each of whom is convinced that they got a particular book first. After a few minutes, Carol tells the children to put away their books and she will tell them a legend about the origins of winter and snow. The children are attentive and ask her to tell it again. She looks at her watch and says that there is not enough time as they are going to go outside to play in the snow for a short time before going home. Before they go, the teacher points out to them the flannel board and envelope where they can find felt figures to help them tell the legend for themselves at activity time tomorrow.

The children gather near the classroom door and many of them seem to have something to say to, or to ask, the two teachers. Anita asks,

"Teacher can I take my card for my mom?"

"Yes, I'm sure she'll be pleased."

Anita runs off to get the card and catches up with the others in the hallway as they are busy finding their outdoor clothes in their lockers and getting help with buttons, zippers and laces. When they are ready, they have ten minutes to enjoy the bright, sunny and snow-filled yard. For the first few minutes Anita runs; then she walks around the rocks and starts to cover them with snow. She says to some children nearby: "Hey, you guys you want to white the rocks with me?" They ignore her but she continues anyway in spite of the snow's reluctance to stay on the rocks.

The vans are ready and waiting, so Carol tells the children to come to her, it is time to go. Most, including Anita, run to her. Tanya, the other teacher, entices a few stragglers to come down from the climbing frame and join the circle. When they join the circle where the other children are already singing their good-bye song, Carol tells them that tomorrow is Thursday and that they will go to the library and Bernadette will come for music. The teachers say good-bye to the children in both Cree and English.

The teachers walk with the children to the van where Marg, the driver, is waiting. As Anita gets on the bus Tanya hands her her card, which she had been keeping safe while Anita was playing outside. Anita turns with a big smile and says,

"Oh, thank you, teacher."

She gives Tanya a hug. Tanya returns the affection and Anita finds her place in the van with a face as happy as the ones on her card.

When all the children have fastened their seatbelts, Marg drives off with an animated group of children. As they leave their teachers wave good-bye and the children chorus,

"Bye, teacher, see you tomorrow."

When they arrive at Anita's house, Marg says,

"Anita you are home. Your two brothers are at the window waiting for you. What are their names?"

"Eric and Jason."

When Anita's mother comes to the window, Marg opens the van and lets Anita out. Marg hands her a letter from the teachers about a get-together for parents in the Orange Room:

"Here Anita, give this to your mom. Tell her if she wants to know more about the meeting and supper to ask me or phone the school."

"Bye, Marg. Thanks, Marg."

"Bye, Anita."

Before Anita opens the door she turns and waves then runs into her home and waves again from the window. The van drives off. It is exactly noon.

Kevin's Day at the Early Learning Centre

This is the first week in May. Kevin is picked up from his uncle's house. This is the third address since Christmas at which Kevin has lived. In the recent past, Kevin saw and experienced things inappropriate for his years. Now, at least, he seems to be in a safe place although he is left very much to his own devices. At school, he is likely to act out some of his anger and frustration, as this is a place where he feels safe and cared for.

On the bus, he is withdrawn and does not talk. Wendy, the driver, chats to him but he does not respond so she jokes with him mildly about getting out of the wrong side of the bed. She adds,

"That's O.K. Kevin, I see that you want to be quiet this morning."

When the van arrives at school, he gets off and is greeted by Carla, one of his teachers,

"Good morning, Kevin. How are you?"

He does not respond but joins the line to go into the school.

As the children from the Purple Room (another fictitious name) walk into the school, Kevin pushes Katie who is in the front of him in line.

"Teacher, Kevin is pushing me."

"Tell him that you don't like that."

A minute or so later, Carla says,

"Kevin, you come here and I will tell you about some of the interesting things that we will do today."

Carla takes Kevin by the hand and chats to him as they walk into the school.

In the hallway, he takes off his boots and puts them in his locker. He can't get the zipper of his jacket opened, and he is almost in tears and begins to mumble to himself. Wendy, the driver, notices his frustration and goes to him,

"Kevin, if you need help, it's O.K. to ask. Would you like some help with that zipper?"

Kevin nods in reply and Wendy helps him, chatting as she does so.

Yesterday, Kevin bounded into th oom doing karate chops. Today he walks slowly in with a furtive and withdrawn look. Susie, his other teacher, greets him and tells him that today they will again decorate the room for the transportation theme.

"I know that you are interested in cars and trucks, so you can probably help some of the other children with their work."

Kevin seems not to be interested, but looks up ever so slightly and walks towards some other

children who are leafing through some books on the theme of transportation. Kevin picks up *Freight Train* by Donald Crews and looks at the pictures intently.

Susie calls all the children to the circle and Kevin walks there with his book. He continues to look at it as Susie greets the children and takes attendance. Carla, the other teacher, goes and quietly says something to him; she probably asks him to put away his book. *Circle Time* continues and he still has not put away his book. Susie goes to him and whispers something in his ear and leads him by the hand to another part of the room. She talks softly to him and together they put the book back. Kevin is soon back in the circle but this time Susie is beside him with her arm around him. Although he never takes part in the discussion about travel by road, water and air, he sits quietly and is probably listening. *Circle Time* ends and the children choose their activities.

As the other children make their way to their chosen activities, Susie stays with Kevin and discusses with him what he would like to do. Since he is very interested in "things" with wheels, she steers him towards the arts-and-crafts table where a collection of small cardboard boxes, paste, pliable wire and items like empty spools are set out. At first, Kevin seems reluctant to show an interest in anything, but almost in spite of himself he becomes involved as Susie shows him outline illustrations of "what children in another school made." Kevin cannot copy these since none of the materials are exactly the same, but they give him ideas and he blurts out,

"I want to make a car that can go really, really fast."

"What a good idea, let's see what materials you will need. You decide what you need to build your car. I'm going away for a few minutes but I'll be back to see what you have chosen."

Susie leaves and goes to talk to two children who are painting.

Kevin takes various items from the construction material and turns them around in his hand to look at them. He then takes the spools and small cylinders and starts to roll them across the tables. After a few moments, he takes a cardboard cylinder and begins to look through it. Suddenly, he gets up and goes across the room to where two boys are building a tall garage for their cars. Kevin topples the three-storey garage by poking it with the cylinder. Susie had watched him get up as she talked to the other children. Now she crosses the room to help negotiate the collapse of the garage,

"What happened here?"

"We was making a garage and Kevin broke it."

"Kevin, did you do that?"

Kevin does not respond but looks defiantly guilty. Susie then asks,

"What should we do now?"

"Make Kevin build a new one for us."

Susie probably knows that this is too overwhelming a task for Kevin, so she suggests,

"I have an idea, let's all rebuild the garage together."

Susie and the two boys begin as Kevin stands aside. She draws him in by handing him blocks and asking him to put them in place for her,

"Today my back is tired and it doesn't like to have to bend low. You can help me."

The garage is soon rebuilt and Susie leads Kevin back to the Arts and Crafts Centre. This time, she also asks Aaron if he would like to join them. Aaron likes to make things, is also interested in cars, and usually gets along well with others.

This time Susie, Kevin and Aaron sit at the table and begin to talk about how to make "two cars that can go really, really fast." Susie helps to keep Kevin on-task by asking him questions.

"O.K. we need what? How many wheels would you like?"

"Four."

"Find the wheels and put them beside the box that you will use for the body."

Kevin chooses a box and four wheels and then Susie discusses with him how to attach the wheels to the box so that they can go around. She probably suspects that he will not cope well with frustration, so she offers to make a wire frame for the box to which he can attach the wheels fairly easily.

"Would you like me to make a frame for your car, then you can put on the wheels and paint it or fix it up any way you want to."

He nods his assent. Susie makes the wire frame; all the time she talks to the boys and encourages Aaron in his decisions.

This time when Susie leaves, Kevin is able to work on his own for almost ten minutes before he becomes restless. Susie returns to praise his efforts.

"Good, I can see that you have attached three of those wheels, securely. You are having a little trouble with the fourth. Let's see if I can help."

Kevin finishes his car, takes it to the painting centre and paints it red. He makes a bit of a mess with the paint but, with a small reminder from Carla, he wipes it up. Now, with his car built, he seems to be in a more co-operative mood.

The remainder of Kevin's day goes smoothly enough. His teachers have to help him negotiate his turn to take a journey in a pretend train that some children have set up by arranging chairs in the middle of the room. He listens as *Freight Train* is read, and listens with seemingly rapt attention as Susie describes the magnificent truck that she saw on the highway this morning. He has some trouble "staying on track" during the transition from Storytime to a group game.

Since he shows some signs of aggression in the hallway as he prepares for home, Wendy invited him to sit up at the front of the bus to help her on the drive home. On the way she asks him if he would like to drive:

"Would you like to drive a semi someday?"

"Yes, a big huge one."

Wendy starts to chat with him about an imaginary "semi" of gigantic proportions with all kinds of crazy options. When he is dropped off at home, Kevin says,

"Bye, Wendy, see you tomorrow."

Kevin's teacher and driver know that this has not been an easy year for him. Until he has found a more settled home life and worked through some of his anger they have decided on the following strategy:

- give positive reinforcement for good behaviour;
- anticipate and take action to avoid troublesome situations;
- when possible, structure his tasks so as to avoid frustration;
- let him feel proud of his achievements;
- acknowledge his feeling of anger and sadness.

Today the teachers' strategy appears to have worked — it took a lot of perception and energy on their part to reach this point. Often helping him to manage his behaviour and find a measure of equilibrium takes the full attention of one of the teachers. This can work, up to a point. But what happens when even three children are having a "hard time" and begin "to act out"?

CONCLUSION

> Something that we often forget about is the contribution the children make to the home. They come home from school happy ... they know things and tell their parents about them. They [the parents] get ideas from them.

This statement was made by a Native community worker, familiar with the program and families, as we were chatting about the Centre. In my comments, I highlighted the gains made by individual children whereas, from her perspective, she focussed on the children within their families and the benefits to the entire family. That the experience in the classrooms benefits the children is without question; that the children return to their homes and become ambassadors for the program is less anticipated but nonetheless real.

The classroom program is successful according to many different criteria. Every year, it is recertified by the Saskatchewan government's Daycare Branch and the "Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale" is carried out with the staff. Over the two-year period, from September 1992 to June 1994, I observed the program adapting the "Accreditation Criteria and Procedures" from *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* (Bredekamp, 1987), and the checklist from the High/Scope curriculum.

In addition to this general overview of the program, I also collected detailed information on eight children (two in each room) over a two-year period; in this I was assisted by two student assistants. Although there was no control group, observing these children allowed me to see their progress over time. This helped me to see how the Centre met its own objectives. For example, the children made very noticeable gains in language development and attention span.

Similar to all highly successful, early-intervention programs (see Schweinhart et al.,1993, pp. 17-20), the Centre's program places considerable emphasis on the development of the children's language and intellectual capacity. These gains, however, can only be made in a classroom climate where children feel safe, wanted and respected. The mutually respectful relationship between children, staff and parents is indeed the pivot around which the curriculum successfully turns. The cornerstone of this success is how the teachers treat the children and their families, and in turn how the teachers are respected by their clients, both young and old. These interactions seem to set in motion a perpetual chain of respectful expectations which should be able to support more youngsters and to keep alive their hope and curiosity, and eventually lead them to a high-school graduation.

CHAPTER SIX:
FAMILIES AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will describe and discuss the Early Learning Centre's family-outreach program. I will also discuss past and present parents' perceptions of the program as well as those of some past students. The chapter will conclude by highlighting some of the salient features of the outreach program and by comparing them to the "Ten Criteria for Excellence in Preschooling" set out at the end of Chapter Two of this report. In structuring this chapter, I will follow a slightly different format than in Chapters Four and Five. Here, I will first present a overview of the literature on parental involvement in their children's schooling; this will be used to create a conceptual framework in which to situate the Centre's family outreach program. I felt that this review of research was necessary because a) family involvement is a more recent emphasis in all educational programs and b) although the outreach component of the Centre's program is highly valued by the staff in its present form, it is not as well established or clearly defined as other program elements. In fact, I observed tremendous growth in commitment to "family involvement" during the course of this project. This review of research and discussion should help the staff become even more focussed in the intent and implementation of their program.

RESEARCH ON FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

The importance of the role played by a child's home background in his/her prospects of success at school has always been recognized. However, it is only in recent years that widespread efforts have been made to set up parental-involvement programs. ("Kids on Camera," which was established in 1990 at Kitchener School, a core school in Regina, is an example of such a program.) Kellaghan et al. (1993) offer three explanations for the hesitant beginnings of these programs:

1. It has taken time for the accumulated effects of research illustrating the effectiveness of parent-involvement programs to be recognized.
2. In recent decades there have been radical changes in the structure of families. Nowadays, families seem to need more support.
3. Efforts to bring about improvements in education by changing aspects of schooling, such as curricula, have largely failed.

The influence of the child's prior dispositions and preparation for schooling has almost a ring of inevitability about it. One of the most influential of the studies to show the tenacity of the home-school link was the Equality of Education Opportunity Survey carried out by Coleman and his colleagues (1966). These researchers concluded:

> Schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context ... this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighbourhood and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. (p. 325)

These and many similar research results could be depressing for those of us interested in equality of opportunity for children; however, evidence now available from studies of parental and family involvement in education is beginning to show that these programs do work and have long-lasting effects on children's school achievement. Henderson (1988) summarized the most common findings about effective parental involvement:

- The family, not the school, provides the primary educational environment for children.
- Involving parents in their children's formal education improves the children's achievement.
- Parent involvement is most effective when it is comprehensive, well planned, and long lasting.
- Involving parents with their children's education at home may not be enough to improve schools; a school's average level of achievement does not appear to improve unless parents are involved in the school.
- Children from low-income and minority families benefit the most when parents are involved in the schools, and parents do *not* have to be well educated to make a difference.
- Students' attitudes about themselves and their control over the environment are critical to achievement; these attitudes are formed primarily at home, though they can be profoundly influenced by experience at school.

One of the points made by Henderson is of particular relevance to the Early Learning Centre: parents do not have to be well educated to make a difference in their children's education. In recent years, instead of carrying out large-scale correlational studies linking such things as socio-economic status and level of school achievement, the research has been far more subtle and attempted to analyze the factors and the processes in the home linked to school success (for example, use of time and space, how children are disciplined and use of language). The nature of parent-child interactions seem to be of particular importance in forming predispositions for the type of learning expected in school. Parents who expose their children to a wide variety of learning opportunities (such as visits to the library and discussions about television programs) and use these occasions to develop children's cognitive skills are giving their children an advantage at school. It is also well established that parents' general beliefs about authority and their place and potential influence in the world affects their children's attitudes, independence and self-concept (see Kellaghan et al., 1993, for a review of this research).

Teachers are often unaware of these more subtle discontinuities between home and school and as a result probably miss many opportunities to bridge this gap for children. Tizard and Hughes' (1984) research could be used to illustrate such a lost insight and subsequent lost opportunity: they studied the language of working-class and middle-class nursery school girls at home and in school. Interestingly, they found no difference between the complexity of the language both groups used at home. This was in stark contrast to language use at school: here the working-class girls seemed to lose some of their competence and revert to a less complex use of language. This finding was further highlighted by the fact that in their open plan classroom, the working-class girls appeared to have much greater difficulties in commanding the teachers' attention. Can this loss of competence and seeming passivity be explained by attitudes of deference and an "intuitive" knowledge picked up at home of one's lack of effectiveness to influence hierarchical structures? If a child's parents are professionals, s/he is used to seeing them speak — they expect to get things done. When teachers are just like your parents, is it not natural that you would expect the teachers to listen to you?

Following from this and similar research, some scholars now explain the school failure of children from certain backgrounds by appealing to the "discontinuity" between the world of the child's home and school. In part, this replaces the "deficit hypothesis" underlying the Head Start programs of the 1960s. In a nutshell, the emphasis on "discontinuity" rather than "deficit" means that the disproportionate school failure of children from certain backgrounds can be explained not by viewing homes as inadequate but by seeing them as different. Once educators believe this, they can then go on to learn about the exact nature of these differences and, more importantly, begin to treat parents as equals rather than as lacking in some way.

Despite the intuitive appeal of the "discontinuity" hypothesis, for many reasons it is not a full

explanation of school failure. Some discontinuity between home and school exists for all children. School learning is much more formal and decontextualized than anything experienced in the home. Furthermore, some children from backgrounds where great differences exist between the general values and beliefs of the home and those of the mainstream society encountered in school, do exceptionally well in school (for example, recent immigrants from mainland China). A further argument against the total acceptance of "home-school discontinuity" as an explanation of school failure is the success of many children from so-called deprived backgrounds. Natalie's story, described by Hymas (1992) and quoted in Kellaghan et al. (1993), illustrates this point. Natalie is a seven-year-old black student living in inner-city Birmingham. She was among the students who did particularly well in the recent national exams in England and scored well above the average. Natalie's mother, whose own parents left Jamaica in the mid-1950s, has high hopes for her daughter and would like her to go to a leading university. She describes some of the reasons for Natalie's success:

> We encourage her at home. She loves reading and doesn't watch a lot of television. I stress to her the importance of doing well at school. I didn't do very well and left when I was 15. I really regret that now and I want my children to do well. (Hymas, quoted in Kellaghan et al., 1993, p. 29)

The school principal also confirmed some of these factors for success:

> It all depends on having high expectations for the children and strong parental support. All ethnic groups want their children to do well, and it is our job to deliver a quality product to ensure they do. (Ibid.)

This latter observation is similar to that which motivated Anne Luke to resign as a teacher with the school board and set up the Early Learning Centre: despite the general perception, she felt strongly that all parents wanted the best for their children.

From the discussion above, we can draw two conclusions: 1) it is important to look beyond labels or indicators of success, such as ethnic background or social class, if not, these may become self-fulfilling prophecies; and 2) family support for long-term success seems to be very important if not essential in helping children achieve their full potential at school.

Home seems to be the place where children develop the motivation to learn and to aspire to an education and lifestyle that can assist them socially, emotionally and financially in the future. Children need academic guidance and support, as Kellaghan et al. (1993) spell out:

> School learning is a long and difficult process for most children. Unless there is a great deal of support and encouragement, children will find it difficult to maintain their interest in and commitment to learning. Almost every child encounters some very difficult problems in particular aspects of learning. Unless there is someone to help children over these special difficulties, they may despair of their ability to learn. It is usually in the home that children get the encouragement and assistance they need to deal with difficult learning problems. (p. 138)

Because of our knowledge about the importance of home support for school achievement, educators and other professionals have a moral obligation to help previously marginalized groups support and motivate their children's efforts to learn at and benefit from school.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN PRESCHOOLING: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The discussion above considered the positive effects of parent's support for and involvement in their children's schooling in general. In this section, I will specifically present the research results on parental involvement in preschooling.

Since the early 1960s and the Johnson administration's war on poverty, all successful early-intervention programs have had a strong parental-involvement component. More recently, in the Bush administration's National Education Strategy, parents were named as the key players in achieving the primary goal — that all children in America would start school

ready to learn. Research results also highlight the importance of parental involvement. The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies (1983) noted that having program goals for parents is one of the strongest predictors of effectiveness.

Parental involvement meant gains for both parents and children. Overall changes in parental behaviours were positive but small (*Better Beginnings: Better Futures*, 1990). Mothers who actively participated in Head Start programs were happier, showed greater trust in other people and improved psychological well-being; they were also less anxious and depressed, and had fewer complaints about health. This finding augurs well for the effects of parental involvement on the mental health of the mothers and the prevention of psychological and psychiatric problems among their children (see Cole and Cole, 1993, pp. 257-67 for a review of this research).

The mothers who were involved in the research also made small changes in their child-rearing practices — they talked more to their children and disciplined them more consistently. This change was probably as a result of their attempts to model the teachers' interactions with children. I noted the same patterns in my work in an inner-city preschool project in Dublin. These mothers also seemed to become more resourceful and found additional support for themselves and their children by making greater use of community resources. Anecdotal data also supports these positive effects on parents from the Early Learning Centre.

Since the principal goal of preschooling is to boost the children's chances of success in school, it is heartening to see that this is indeed the case: children whose parents were highly involved in the Perry Preschool Project performed better on measures of cognitive achievement than those who were not. All parents, whether or not they were involved in the programs themselves, valued the preschool experience for their children. Although not indicating active involvement, this result does demonstrate commitment to preschooling on the part of the parents. As will be seen later in this chapter, this was the overwhelming response of the parents of children attending the Early Learning Centre.

In the light of all the positive evidence supporting parental involvement in preschooling, the Ontario government's *Better Beginnings: Better Futures* report concludes that, "it is important that programs support the existing family structure by involving parents actively" (p. 30). It seems that parental or family involvement in preschooling is essential and once some general guidelines are followed, involvement programs can take many forms. The forms of some of these programs will be explored below.

PARENTAL-INVOLVEMENT PROGRAMS

Programs to involve parents have used a variety of different tactics to promote their involvement. One system used by Kellaghan et al. (1993) to categorize these programs is to classify them by the focus they place on formal learning and teaching:

> Activities that focus on teaching and learning may be described as *proximal;* those that do not relate directly to teaching and learning but to supporting these activities may be described as *intermediate;* more remote educational activities may be regarded as *distal.* [Emphasis in text p. 32]

A few examples will help make these classifications more vivid and concrete. In *proximal* type activities the parents are expected to carry out specific learning activities at home or to become involved in school instruction (remuneration could be involved for the latter). *Intermediate* type programs can involve a variety of activities including active communication between home and school about the children's progress, helping out with field trips and general tasks in the school, and taking part in meeting and workshops related to the children's development. Finally, *distal* type activities might include the following type of parental involvement: membership on the

Board of Directors or participation in parent-teacher associations; attending general educational programs for parents, such as cookery, literacy and self-development; or contact with other community resources that offer support for children and families. Kellaghan et al.'s program classification centres on how close the activity is to the child's learning in the classroom. On the other hand, Kagan (1989) classifies programs according to the nature of the activity itself.

For Kagan, *parent involvement* means that the parents are enlisted as volunteers in the school. In other cases, schools may see their role as teaching better parenting skills — this can be referred to as *parent education*. *Parent participation* is involved when the parents are given the opportunity to participate in the school's decision-making process. Finally, Kagan argues for an approach which she terms *family support*. This may include elements of all of the above but is built on the premise that all families have strengths and benefit from support. This is very similar to the approach of European countries like Belgium, Denmark and Holland where universal preschooling and community support are available for all children and their families (van der Eyken, 1982).

The two systems of classifying programs do not overlap neatly but they help to clarify the focus of parental-involvement programs. The intent of Kellaghan and his co-authors, and Kagan's categories of parent involvement, could be summarized in two questions: 1) Does the program focus on getting the parents to help directly in the child's instruction either at home or in school? 2) Does the program focus mainly on improving the parent's skills? Ideal programs should probably involve both areas. This comprehensive program would constitute what Kagan (1989) sees as "family support."

By introducing the term "family" into the description of parental-involvement programs, Kagan (1989) touches on a notion which is very pertinent for the Early Learning Centre. Since many of the families served by the Centre do not conform to a conventional structure, referring only to "parental involvement" is not appropriate. Many children are brought up by members of their extended families who need to be involved in the preschool program. In some cases, foster parents have actively participated in the education of children under their care.

Based on the discussion in the chapter thus far, a comprehensive program of family involvement is required to reach the optimal results for both children and adults. Many positive results, however, can be reached with a more modest program. Perhaps a middle ground can be achieved by focussing the program on Kellaghan et al.'s (1993) intermediate category and include other elements where resources allow. This, in fact, seems to be the case of the family-involvement program at the Early Learning Centre. In addition, the Centre's program is focussed both on improving the child's learning opportunities and on offering support to the caregivers.

In the next section, the family-involvement program at the Early Learning Centre will be described and analyzed using the "Ten Criteria for Excellence in Preschooling" outlined in Chapter Two.

THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE'S APPROACH TO PARENT AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Whereas in the literature the term "outreach" is usually used only to describe the component of the involvement programs where staff go out to visit families in their homes, at the Early Learning Centre the staff often use "outreach" and "involvement" interchangeably. "Outreach" seems to be used in the sense of reaching out to parents and families. The second of the Early Learning Centre's two goals affirms the importance the program places on parental involvement: 1) to equalize the educational and social opportunities of low income children; and 2) to work co-operatively with

parents towards the achievement of this. In the past year, to fit the new organization of the family involvement program, the Director, Administrative Assistant and the teachers have developed and expanded the second goal, and added statements outlining their beliefs, goals and six specific objectives. These are outlined below:

Beliefs	• Parents are the first educators of their children, school is an extension of this. • Parents have the most knowledge of their children. • Parents love their children. • Parents' needs must be met in order to be emotionally present for their children. • Children do better when parents support the program.
Goals	• To hear what the parents wish for their children. • To work in partnership with the parents to maximize opportunities for learning for their children.
Objectives	• That parents will feel welcome and comfortable in the school setting. • That parents will feel they have something valuable to contribute to the program. • That parents will recognize that learning is a lifelong process and thus become strong role models for their children. • That parents will grow in self-esteem and competence by actively participating in their children's learning. • That the school will encourage parents to make use of the open-door policy already established.

COMPONENTS OF THE PARENT/FAMILY-INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

Because the Early Learning Centre believes that the family is the child's first and most important environment, parent involvement is seen as central, not peripheral, to the program. In responding to a questionnaire, the teaching staff all ranked the home/family as the most important influence in the child's life. As a result, there is an implicit recognition by the staff of the importance of continuity and congruency between the home and the school environment. In discussing the history of the Early Learning Centre, Anne Luke talked about her early discussions with parents where she tried to find the common themes between what parents wanted for their children and what her education and experience told her was good early childhood practice. Silvern (1988) suggests that preschool programs in particular need to create continuity between the home and school environments with the understanding that the school should be striving towards an "ideal" home environment. For the Early Learning Centre this "ideal" environment is created by respecting the child's home and cultural background and incorporating elements of good early childhood practice into the classroom setting. In reality, this is an example of the mutuality which Anne Luke refers to as one of her guiding principles.

For parents this emphasis on continuity means that they are respected and are not judged. This feeling of being respected and valued can be very important to parents who are marginalized by our society and who often feel they have very little control over their lives. Even when families have a very "dysfunctional" home environment, where children display signs of neglect or abuse, the Early Learning Centre attempts to build upon what parents want for their children and attempt to offer them opportunities to more effectively realize these goals within their homes. As was apparent in the earlier discussion, fostering home-school continuity is a central notion in the literature on family involvement.

It is useful to note that this emphasis on continuity and respect stands in stark contrast to the history of Indian education. From the 1880s up until the 1960s large numbers of Native children

received their education in Residential Schools. In practical terms the goals of those institutions were to wipe out the traditional culture of the children. Many members of the Native community argue that the scars of life in these institutions are still having negative effects on individuals and families. For these and many other reasons, the staff at the Early Learning Centre want to make this emphasis on respect and continuity even more specific and put their beliefs into practice, since one of the program goals is to "foster parents' growth in self-esteem and competence by actively participating in their children's education."

Although overall the goals and objectives of the program focus on children's education, this latter objective focusses on parents' development and education (Kagan, 1989). In general, the second goal and related objectives focus on what Kellaghan et al. (1993) would classify as "intermediate" type involvement activities; this implies a balance between involvement which focusses on direct involvement in the children's formal education and more general, informal types of involvement.

In analyzing the Centre's involvement goals, there are two additions that could be made to better reflect current practice there: 1) although parents are encouraged to become involved in governance by attending the annual general meeting, and voting and participating in the board of directors, no objectives specifies this practice; 2) parents who enroll their children at the Early Learning Centre are *encouraged* but *not required* to participate. Although this is implied in the objectives, perhaps a statement to that effect could be added because of the prominence given to this point in the literature. Viewed as a whole, however, the goals and objectives fit well with the spirit and practice of the framework derived from research.

OPEN-DOOR POLICY AND PARENT VOLUNTEERS

To create an environment in which parents feel welcome and comfortable in the school setting.

This is the first objective of the Centre's involvement program and encapsulates the open-door policy which has always been part of the Centre's *"raison d'être."* The Early Learning Centre was founded on close personal bonds of mutuality and respect and this has continued as it grew and moved to better premises away from the community it serves. In spite of the inevitable process of becoming more formal because of increases in size, the Director and staff have always struggled to keep alive the initial, deeply felt sentiment of partnership with parents.

In the early days when the Centre operated first in one house on Dewdney Avenue, and then in two adjacent houses, parents often dropped in. When recalling those days, Anne Luke said, "There was always coffee in the kitchen, parents could drop by anytime for a chat, a cup of coffee and even a smoke." This open-door policy still exists, and parents are informed about it when registering their children; the circumstances, however, have changed. The principal change is that most parents can no longer walk to the Centre. Less of a deterrent for the visiting parents is the ban on smoking in public buildings; although in spite of the health benefits, it tends to lend a more institutional air to the Centre.

If parents want to spend a morning or an afternoon at the Centre, either observing or volunteering in their child's classroom, or volunteering for other duties in the school, they can ride to and from school on the van with their child. This is possible since the Centre acquired a fourth van and there are now some spare seats in each van. This is also convenient for field trips as there is room for a parent volunteer to go along.

Over the two years of the study, I observed parents (sometimes grandparents, aunts and foster parents) go on field trips and volunteer to work in the classrooms, for example, one father painted a large Christmas mural; a mother brought her spinning wheel, demonstrated how to

spin, and showed the children the items she had knitted from the wool; and one grandfather came in and told stories.

In the early days at the Centre, parents helped out with many chores, such as repairing toys and cleaning. Everyone, including the Director, sat around and chatted as they worked. Although this type of spontaneous involvement is now harder to organize, a small core of parents volunteer regularly. One mother travels on the bus a few times a week, answers the phones and acts as a receptionist. Another mother has given workshops to the parents on substance abuse and spoken very openly about her own dependence in the past.

Apart from transportation, another barrier to involvement is child care for the younger sibling or siblings. When parents come to volunteer or to spend time with their child in the classroom what are they to do with the younger child? The teachers welcome them in the classroom but this is not always a satisfactory solution, as the parents are often preoccupied with trying to keep the younger child out of mischief that they scarcely relax.

Another barrier for parents is simply shyness. Although everyone invites them to drop in, this is easier said than done in a building where all involved seem to have a role to play. At first, all parents who visit classrooms feel awkward unless they have a specific task to perform, like reading to the children. However, once the initial barriers are broken down, parents can become quite comfortable. The key to breaking these barriers is forming personal relationships, in other words, the staff have to get to know the parents and befriend them.

This point about relationships and making parents feel comfortable in the school is illustrated by one mother's story:

> When I came to the Early Learning Centre, I was at the end of my rope. I didn't know how to be with my children or to play with them. I didn't have any of these skills from my own background. People helped me. I learned how to enjoy my children more.
>
> In the beginning, I saw Anne as the big boss, way up there. But then I saw her trusting in me ... reaching out a hand. The staff believed in me. After a while dropping into Anne's office was like going into my own living room, only that the furniture was different.
>
> Since I became involved at the Centre, I've been growing and learning. Now, I understand my past much better; I understand how I hurt other people. I volunteer at the Early Learning Centre because I want to give back some of the help that has been given to me.

Besides illustrating the importance of trusting in parents and treating them with respect, testimonials like this also show the possibilities that involvement in their children's education can open up for the parents' own growth and development.

Helping parents to make that first crucial step to become involved often requires a lot of unobtrusive skill in convincing them that they are really valued as partners and that they know a lot about their children. This process is set in motion when the parents come to register, and further trust is built up as they begin to attend the special events in the classrooms.

It is interesting to note that when parents talk about why they become involved with the Early Learning Centre, they use words like "trust" and "friendship." Notions of professionalism often put barriers between people and prevent professionals from extending a hand of friendship and real warmth. This is not the case at the Centre, and yet the staff's behaviour is most professional.

SPECIAL EVENTS IN THE CLASSROOMS

During the year most of the classrooms organize a number of events for parents and children to attend together. These events are usually held on Fridays but some are held on regular school days.

An event that is particularly well attended is the end-of-the-year ceremony in each room. When at all possible, transportation is arranged on one of the school vans.

I attended several of these events. Some get the parents involved in doing some craft or activity with their children, others are organized as social events. Coffee and snacks are provided; snacks are often prepared by the children on the previous day. On these occasions, the parents get a chance to visit with each other and with the teachers. Since these social events are usually held on Friday mornings, the children from the morning and the afternoon sessions can meet each other. This often generates a lot of excitement as before this they knew each other only from the photographs on the classroom wall.

As the parents visit, a recent videotape of the children plays on a television in the classroom. At times, the teachers bring the parents' attention to their child engaged in some interesting activities; at other times, the parents or family members and the children watch and discuss the video on their own. The video often provides a focal point for parents, children and teachers.

Sometimes these special events are themselves recorded on film or video. In turn, the photographs and tapes provide a focus for discussion in the classroom on the following day and help the children to construct an image of themselves and build self-esteem. Examples of particularly memorable and successful events were the "Grandparent's Day" held in one classroom and the "Classes Fun Days" in summer with many outdoor games and activities. In addition to these events for children and parents, the teachers in each room organize parent meetings.

CLASSROOM MEETINGS

Parent meetings are held in each of the classrooms and each teaching team is responsible for coordinating them. At the beginning of the year, and again when the weather improves these meetings are held monthly, but in winter they are usually held bimonthly because of a fall-off in attendance. Generally, the teachers and some of the parents provide a simple supper. Despite the fact that during the 1993-94 school year, transportation was not supplied, attendance at some of the evenings was very good. On some occasions, up to two-thirds of the parents attended.

Even more so than for the special events, attendance at the classroom meetings seems to depend on the teachers being able to make a phone call or talk to the parents to invite them. The drivers also play an important part in extending invitations to families to all events, and then reminding them again closer to the day. This is one reason why the drivers are now more and more encouraged to be part of the instructional team. At the monthly meetings with the teachers, they learn of the plans for the coming weeks.

Although the teachers plan the initial meetings, the parents (and grandparents) are encouraged to decide on possible themes for subsequent meetings and on how often to meet. Planning meetings and choosing themes can be a daunting task for many parents who are not used to being listened to or having their opinions valued. I observed one meeting where, after supper, two rooms decided to come together to watch a video. In the ensuing discussion, some parents said that they would like help in talking to their children about racial identity. One mother's remark that her four-year-old of mixed race had just started to ask questions about why he was darker than her, triggered this debate. On another occasion, a mother who had just lost a very close family member wanted help on how to explain death to her children.

Finding resources — either people or material — to answer parents needs is not an easy task for teachers; neither is leading discussions so that the participants find their own solutions. Handling group dynamics among adults takes a different set of skills than that of teaching children. The teachers, however, do an excellent job in making the parents feel welcome and in helping them relax and enjoy a night away from their children.

In keeping with the purposes of parental-involvement programs discussed earlier, these classroom meetings serve many functions by providing parents with a night out away from their children, a meal out and an opportunity to socialize with other adults and the teachers, information about their children's progress and program, and pertinent information for self-improvement, such as providing parents with information that they need on a variety of other topics. Since the classroom meetings are a recent innovation in the outreach program, no doubt they will evolve and become even more educational (Kagan, 1989).

HOME VISITS

Unlike the classroom meetings, teachers have visited the children's families since the earliest days of the program. When the program was small, these visits tended to be more informal and spontaneous. Now, for many reasons, teachers have to make appointments beforehand. This can be difficult as a large percentage of the families do not have telephones. Here again, the teachers rely on the drivers to deliver a message and get a reply.

Teachers are expected to visit the families of all the children in their classes three times a year, although families in particularly challenging circumstances may be visited more frequently. In the highly successful Perry Preschool Project, teachers made far more frequent home visits and the researchers recommend that home visits be made "at least once a month" (Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart, 1993, p. 17). It is not possible for the teachers at the Early Learning Centre to visit the homes this often because they teach full days, and on Fridays they also have to find time for special parent or parent-child events, as well as making 24 home visits each semester.

Although the number of home visits that it is possible to make is, by some standards, less than optimal, nonetheless both parents and teachers find these visits very worthwhile. While at first some of the parents may be reticent and ashamed by the lack of amenities in their homes, once they sense that the teachers have come to talk to them, to tell them about their child and to support them in their efforts, they relax. Again and again, present and former staff have stressed the importance of the first contact in establishing a sense of trust with the parents. In reflecting upon these visits, the teachers feel this is a valuable way of meeting the parents and establishing some form of positive relationship. If, in spite of their best efforts, parents consistently resist the teachers' efforts to set up an appointment, no visit is made.

Having a teaching team consisting of two people, with one from a First Nations background, greatly helps in establishing this rapport. Research on friendships shows that most people tend to feel more in common with people from their own racial background — to paraphrase Pogrebin (1987), a stranger who is one of our own kind is a potential friend. As Pogrebin shows in her work, this sentiment has much more to do with sensing similarities and familiarities in shared knowledge and experiences than with race *per se*. I explored these ideas with some of the present and past First Nations and Metis staff; they agreed and added that for them, rapport in an Indian household was automatic — they felt at home immediately. Because home visits often involve cross-cultural communication, it is important that the teachers be aware of different styles of communication. In the past year, the teachers were given such a workshop by a First Nations social worker.

PARENTING PROGRAM

The emphasis in some parent-involvement programs is mainly parent development, where the school or preschool run a variety of self-improvement classes. (These are what Kellaghan et al. (1993) refer to as distal program.) In the past, the Early Learning Centre has run a variety of self-improvement activities (such as the parent support group), but these have strained the Centre's resources. In recent years, the Centre has hosted several parenting programs which have been well attended. These obviously fill a need but do not over-tax the Centre's resources.

In order to encourage and to make it possible for parents to attend, transportation and baby-sitting are provided if needed.

The most popular of the programs is "123 Magic," a program delivered on video which uses a behaviour-management approach. I attended one of these workshops with 24 "parents," among whom was a grandparent and a foster parent. Three fathers also attended. The viewing of the video was broken into two sessions with a break in between for a simple lunch of soup and bannock. After viewing the video, the parents discussed what they had seen, asked questions and shared ideas and stories. This session was facilitated by a social worker from Child and Youth Services, Department of Health.

The other parenting program, "Nobody's Perfect," is designed for low-income, single parents and is run over a six-week period. This program is always given by outside resource people. Last year it was run by one of the nurses from the Sunrise Health Program, City of Regina.

SPECIAL SCHOOL EVENTS

Whereas the special events discussed above are organized by individual classrooms, occasionally special schoolwide events are held. During this research, these included the annual Christmas party, clothing exchanges and a Mini-Mosaic (a multicultural event).

The *Christmas party* is a major event at the Early Learning Centre. It is extremely well attended and generates much excitement among the children and parents. Formerly held at the Regina Friendship Centre, in the past two years, because of costs, it has been held in a church hall adjacent to the Centre. In spite of the added distance, families come out in force.

It follows a typical Christmas party format complete with children's performances, a visit from Santa, gifts, entertainment and food. Past pupils and parents have fond memories of the party.

The *clothing exchanges* are now organized twice a year by the Canadian Federation of University Women. The volunteers find and categorize children's and adults' clothes and the families can come, make their selection, and exchange items if they wish.

The *Mini-Mosaic* was an event that grew out of this research project. The research assistant in the first year of the project, Carol Ledoux, was asked to reflect on the family outreach program and suggest any changes that she thought would either meet parents' needs or enhance the spirit of the program. The Mini-Mosaic grew out of the staff's discussions of Carol's suggestions. Although the heart of the event is built around First Nations and Metis culture, the displays mounted in the hallway of the Centre also represent the traditions of other staff members and parents.

Now, the Mini-Mosaic has become an annual event and is held on a Friday in June, when it is hoped that the sun will shine. Parents and children gather in the late morning to view the displays, visit and nibble at the samples of food from the different countries on display. At noon, Lilly Daniels, the Early Learning Centre's honorary Elder, brings her troupe of dancers to perform on the school grounds. With their colourful costumes and dancing to the beat of a group of local traditional drummers, the dancers arouse a lot of pride and interest. When the dancing ends, the young dancers eat quickly and are driven back to school. Among the dancers are some past pupils of the Centre; each year a few of the children attending the Centre come dressed in their dancing regalia, prepared to join in.

The Mini-Mosaic ends shortly after the families finish their lunch of soup, bannock and coffee. This lunch, similar to the others provided for families, is prepared by the cook with help from other staff members. This seems to be a very successful event and captures the spirit of the Early Learning Centre: even though the other staff were happy with the idea of planning a

pow-wow, the First Nations staff felt more comfortable when the event was changed to become more multicultural. A First Nations staff person summed up this feeling well when she said, "This is not an Indian school, there are children and staff from other backgrounds here. We would not feel comfortable putting our culture first."

PARENT BOARD

Parents make up the majority of the nine-member Board of Directors. In fact, at least 50% of the Board must consist of parents. Members are elected each year at the Annual General Meeting by the parents who attend. Attendance is usually fairly good, as transportation and babysitting are available.

Parents who run for election are nominated and must be present at the meeting. After the elections, a Chair, Secretary and Treasurer are chosen by the Board. I attended several of the monthly Board meetings. These are pleasant, informal, but efficiently run events where items of routine business such as funding are discussed, in addition to specific decisions that have to be made from time to time.

Although being a Board member may at first be a strain for some of the parents, most benefit from the experience. This is often the first taste of community decision-making that most of these parents have experienced. To be listened to and taken seriously is new. One mother related a recent incident she had had when applying for welfare assistance: she was made to feel ashamed and inadequate. She contrasted this with the way she was treated on the Board. Being a Board member, especially taking on a leadership role, is often the first step parents take to further self-development and community leadership. This seems to be especially true for women; and as one past female member said, "Joining the Board was a big step for me. I didn't believe that I could do anything. When Anne listened to me, I began to believe in myself. I saw that I could do things. Since then I've been growing and learning."

Observing and participating in these meetings, I often thought that given more resources, interested Board members could be helped to grow even more. Perhaps a few informal workshops in leadership or community development would help these parent leaders to realize their own potential to change their lives, the lives of their children and even their community. As was noted in the review of the literature, it has been observed that poor and working-class parents may have developed an attitude of deference towards authority and a sentiment of being ineffective in changing their lives. No doubt, part of this attitude is based in reality, but with more confidence and know-how parents could tap community resources. However, to initiate a program of education and community development like this is to ask the Early Learning Centre to take on a wider role that is beyond its present resources. Already by offering parents an opportunity to participate in the governance of the school, the Centre is doing much to boost parents' sense of control or ownership of the program. As research has shown, these benefits will transfer to their children's education.

FUNDRAISING

Parents and families participate in a number of fundraising initiatives throughout the year. The most important of these are a chocolate drive and raffle for a Christmas hamper. Board members often take an active role, for example, going around to local businesses asking for contributions of door prizes for the Annual Fundraising Dinner. Once again, like all of the outreach programs, participation in fundraising is voluntary.

As all of the previous accounts of the parental program tend to show, many parents want to participate in their children's education. In the next section, it will be seen that they also value the services that the Early Learning Centre provides for their children.

PARENTS' EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTION

The Early Learning Centre began as a partnership between parents and Anne Luke, and careful attention was paid to understanding and respecting parents' values and goals for their children's development. During the course of this evaluation, a considerable amount of time was spent in consulting with parents in order to understand their hopes for their children, their expectations of the Early Learning Centre, and their satisfaction with the Early Learning Centre's program. The parents of 58 children who had attended the Centre were interviewed and an informal "gathering" of former and present parents and students was held during which 36 people filled out a brief questionnaire. As a follow up to the "gathering," another group of parents participated in a more detailed discussion about the program.

The most significant and nearly unanimous response throughout all these discussions was that parents are very satisfied with the program as it has existed over the past 16 years. One parent commented: "They learn so much at the Early Learning Centre. They are doing a good job at it. My child comes home and talks and opens up to me."

Parents were also asked about their expectations of the program. "What should a good preschool program provide for children?" and "What would you like children to learn at the Early Learning Centre?" There were some consistent themes in the responses to these questions. Parents want their children to develop strong self-esteem and to learn to behave in acceptable and healthy ways: to respect others, to cooperate with other children, to respect and obey authority, and to be proud of themselves.

Parents also mentioned the importance of children being exposed to, and developing pride in, the First Nations culture. While none of the parents suggested the Early Learning Centre was not doing enough work in this area, parents clearly feel this is something they want their children exposed to, and something which they appreciate about the program. It would appear that they have a real appreciation of the central role cultural identity plays in the development of a child's sense of self. Research (much with African-American children) has made this point:

> A number of Black writers conclude that Black children need to develop an extended self-identity (Semaj, 1985) as well as an individual identity. Race consciousness and pride ... provide a foundation for the resilience and coping strategies necessary for resisting racism (Cross, 1985). Studies on children of color from other groups are fewer in number; however, some also suggest that all children in a political and cultural "minority" status in our society need to construct a strong group identity for healthy development. (Beuf, 1977; Guttierrez, 1982; Levine and Ruiz, 1978; Milner, 1983) [Derman-Sparks, 1989, p. 4]

In keeping with the orientation of this evaluation, this emphasis by parents on cultural programming led to a number of staff discussions, workshops, and to an increased awareness among the staff to continue to develop this aspect of the program. One resource which staff plan to utilize in the future is Derman Spark's (1989) *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The family is the main support system for the child. However, even in times of calm and relative prosperity, poor families find life a struggle. In answering their own often crushing needs, adults create less than ideal environments for their children. Studies of resilience among children growing up in risk-filled environments have shown that one of the principal protective factors is the availability of support in child rearing — having a sense that there is somebody out there to help (Werner, 1993). The family-outreach program at the Early Learning Centre offers such relief and a support network which can help to make parents feel less isolated.

Perhaps even more crucial than any special programming for parents is the overall attitude

of compassion, understanding and respect shown by staff towards parents. One of the goals of the outreach program involves listening to parents to find out what they want for their children. Listening and valuing what is said is perhaps one of the greatest signs of respect that can be shown to another; it is also the most natural and effective form of therapy. Parents have to heal and develop, if they are to be effective in child rearing.

Listening to parents and valuing their voices is built into the structure of the outreach program, through the parent-run Board, classroom meetings and home visits. Many of the other events attempt to make family members feel comfortable by recreating familiar events, such as simple meals. Listening to and learning from parents is one of the research-based criteria of effective preschool programs named by Schweinhart et al. (1993).

The family-support program at the Early Learning Centre reaches out to parents in two ways: first, the staff actively encourage parents to be partners in their children's education, listen to them, and invite them into the school. Second, the teachers learn as much as possible about the children's homes and transform school to make it more like home, thus bridging the home-school gap. This latter type of "outreach" was apparent in the account in Chapter Five describing the children's experience in the classrooms.

That the quality of the outreach program meets the standards of an ideal research-based program can be judged most succinctly by comparing it to the "Ten Criteria of Excellence in Preschooling." Three of the ten criteria apply to family-support programs: 1) parents as partners, home visitation and communication; 2) growth in parent competence, involvement and confidence; and 3) a relaxed but encouraging attitude towards parent involvement. That the program at the Early Learning Centre meets these criteria should be evident from the previous discussion in this chapter.

The staff use a wide variety of methods to communicate with parents, including using the drivers as intermediaries as well as by phone and letter. The preschool is governed by a parent-run Board of Directors. Parents are encouraged to visit the school, and teachers visit the home. All of the parents who participate in their children's education seem to gain from the experience, but some seem to gain more than others. Many former parents, especially those who have become actively involved, go on to pursue further studies. Finally in keeping with the criteria, the staff's attitude towards parent involvement is relaxed — parents are encouraged to participate in all or some of the involvement opportunities. Even if parents cannot participate actively, they are always informed about their child's progress and program and regularly receive a newsletter.

Apart from the three criteria listed above, another of the "Ten Criteria of Excellence in Preschooling" applies to the evolution of the Centre's family outreach program. This criterion states that an effective program should be flexible, self-evaluating and adjusting. Over the years, the outreach program has taken many different forms. It is constantly evolving to suit changing circumstances. For instance, on two occasions, because of specific grants, the Early Learning Centre has been able to hire a family worker. In August 1992, the staff decided to undertake all outreach work themselves and to abandon the idea of hiring a family worker. The rationale behind this decision was in order to keep an educational rather than a social work emphasis in the preschool's contact with families. Since making this decision, the program described above has steadily been taking shape and will continue to be evaluated and adjusted by the staff.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the 1993-94 parent-outreach activities, the teachers found that events which allow parents to engage in activities with their children seemed to be particularly popular. They judged that for the most part they were being successful in establishing positive relationships with parents. Hence, the restructuring of the week to allow staff

to focus more time on planning events and visiting seems to have paid off. Because of this, it is likely that the staff will continue to develop the present program, emphasizing components that have worked but continuing to try out new parent events and methods of communication.

The most recent development is the creation of a parent Resource/Drop-in Centre. This has been set up in a room in the building; the nature and exact use of this centre is still being planned. The idea of the Drop-in Centre grew in part from a suggestion made by a research assistant with this project, and leadership in planning and developing the Resource Centre has come from the Board of Directors themselves. Perhaps the two biggest obstacles to using this as a casual drop-in centre are transportation and childcare. Indeed, these are the two biggest obstacles to greater participation in all the involvement activities; providing them puts considerable strain on the resources of the Early Learning Centre. However, given the crucial importance of parental and family involvement in helping children stay interested in and committed to completing their education, these efforts are very worthwhile. In addition, the long-term benefits for the preschoolers and society in general are numerous.

In the next chapter, the relationships between the Early Learning Centre and various communities will be described and discussed. Following this, the issue of whose responsibility it is to look after the welfare of children born into poverty and risk-filled environments will be addressed.

CHAPTER SEVEN:
THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE AND THE COMMUNITY

It takes a community to bring up a child. (African Proverb)

Individuals, families, communities and governments all share responsibility for the well-being of children. (Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children, 1994)

INTRODUCTION

Paraphrasing a well-known dictum, we can say that no institution is an island — this is certainly true if it is to survive. For the Early Learning Centre, this is definitely the case. It survives because it is well anchored in a number of support systems. These support systems can be seen as a number of communities which encircle the Centre and maintain it as a vital focal point for so many families and children. Furthermore, it serves as an inspiration for others, and is increasingly becoming a leader for other institutions in the Province and even further afield.

In this chapter, I will outline the various communities the Early Learning Centre is responsive to, depends upon for support, and to which it offers inspiration and leadership. In discussing these communities, the issue of funding will be addressed. I will then raise the question of, "Who should take responsibility for the welfare of low-income children in the community?" In the concluding section, I will also discuss other supports that parents feel they need to bring up their children successfully.

GIVE AND TAKE: THE MULTIPLE COMMUNITIES OF THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

The Early Learning Centre does not have a community as such but relates simultaneously to many communities. Its most important community consists of Regina's low-income families — more specifically, the parents and children that it serves. This is not a tightly knit group as it is not geographically restricted to one area of the city. Poor children live in many parts of Regina (see Geller et al., 1993). A compounding factor is that poor families are forced to be very mobile. Overlapping with, but also part of, the low-income community are Regina's First Nations and Metis communities (a high proportion of the preschoolers come from that background). In part, these communities are held together by extended family networks. An investigation of enrollment patterns at the Centre revealed many of these networks. When questioned, a majority of parents indicated that they had heard about the Early Learning Centre through family or friends.

That this community supports the Early Learning Centre is evident from the willingness of parents to have their children attend. First Nations families often like to keep their children with them as long as possible, but they are very willing to have them attend the preschool. In addition, they show support by attending special events and doing a limited amount of fundraising. In the many interviews, both formal and informal, which were carried out for this evaluation, parents voiced strong approval of the Centre. Perhaps one of the most unobtrusive but strongest indicators of the approval of the low-income community is the length of the waiting list. The Centre's reputation has traveled by word of mouth, and parents and grandparents put children's names on the waiting list.

Although the Early Learning Centre serves the low-income community, it depends on many other communities to survive. Within the city and province, this support network is wide and diverse, and is both formal and informal. To illustrate, a sampling of some links in this network will be discussed.

The Centre's main source of funding is the provincial Department of Social Services, which supplies 64% of the costs. Although not being able to fund the program adequately, that

Department offers other types of support, including moral support, advice and expertise. The Department of Health also provides advice and expertise to the Centre through its Child and Youth Services program. In Chapter Five, we learned that the "Speech and Language Program" in the classrooms is conducted by one of the agency's speech pathologists. The services of other professionals are also called upon: for instance, a psychiatrist recently held two workshops at the preschool on hyperactive children. Illustrating the informal networks nurtured by the Director is the willingness of these professionals to come and help, either as part of their workload or outside of their official work time. During this study, some social workers and a child psychologist were willing to give up their lunch hours to attend meetings at the Centre and help with projects. This willingness to be of assistance is reciprocated by the staff of the Early Learning Centre.

When Child and Youth Services make a request that a child go to the Centre, the staff do everything possible to facilitate the request. (The requests of other agencies are also accommodated.) To show appreciation, individuals who have supported the Centre's work are invited to attend social events. But the greatest thanks these professionals receive is to know that a model project like the Early Learning Centre exists to support families and, indirectly, their own work. This became clear to me when I interviewed some of these professionals. They greatly admire the work of the Centre and the commitment and dedication of the staff. This was highlighted by an answer to one of my questions. When I asked, "Do you have any suggestions for improvements to the Early Learning Centre?" one person answered, "Less modesty on the part of the Director and staff. They should realize what a wonderful job they are doing and broadcast it more." The others present were in firm agreement.

The reputation of the Early Learning Centre is high throughout Regina. When completing this project, I asked many of my friends and acquaintances from different walks of life if they had heard about it. Many had, and most of these referred to the fine reputation that it has. It is because of this sterling reputation that the staff are able each year to raise the remaining 36% of the funds necessary to keep the Centre open, and to recruit volunteers.

It is this reputation, as well as the many channels the Centre's staff use to keep in touch with its supporters, that helps to keep the various support systems vital. Each year, the City of Regina gives grants to support the transportation and music program and to help with other specific aspects of the operating costs. In addition, support for the Early Learning Centre is high within the city administration. In October 1993, I interviewed the Mayor, who was very familiar with the program and admired the work being carried out there. He was aware of the underfunding, but because of the structuring of the provincial and city finances, no other fiscal assistance would be available at present or in the immediate future from the city. The Mayor did, however, refer to other types of support that might be explored in the future. Already the Centre gets some assistance of this nature: the health program mentioned in Chapter 4 is delivered by the Sunrise Health Program, a part of the city's Health Department. As well, the Centre is a part of several loose support networks with other social agencies in the city and province, especially regarding other early childhood programs. For example, in the case of the Catholic School Board, an informal liaison was transformed into a more formal partnership with the preschool program at Sacred Heart School.

The history of this partnership is quite complex and shows the impact and importance of informal networking. The Early Learning Centre does not give allegiance to any particular church; over the years, however, various people connected with the Catholic Church have become friends and staunch supporters of the Centre. Funding to set up the program came, in part, from a grant from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Regina. One of the Centre's consultants, who is occasionally called upon to advise the Board and the Director, is and has been for many years a prominent staff member of the Separate School Board. There were many

other individual friendships and exchanges of mutual support over the years — these have set the stage for this partnership.

When the preschool at Sacred Heart, a core area school in Regina, was being set up, the teacher visited the Early Learning Centre to observe and to get advice, and generally to benefit from the experience and combined wisdom of the Director and the instructional staff. Staff from the Centre also visited the new preschool. When the latter was operating successfully, the idea of a mutually beneficial partnership emerged: the Early Learning Centre's staff had experience and knowledge in early childhood education, while School Board personnel had expertise in a broad range of areas as well as having a network of resources and supports. But perhaps greater than the tangible support is the moral support that both preschool programs can offer each other which is the basis of this partnership.

Other partnerships also exist. One is with the Canadian Federation of University Women, and the most recent is with Save the Children. The University Women were familiar with the Centre's reputation and approached the Director to learn of ways in which they could help; from this, the partnership evolved. This partnership gives the Centre both moral and practical support: they run fundraising events; one of the women runs a literacy and upgrading program (preparation for GED) as a volunteer; and they run clothing exchanges.

Although the partnership with Save the Children has only been formed recently, that organization has long been a supporter of the Early Learning Centre. It was a grant from that organization, along with one from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, that allowed the Centre to open. Every year, Save the Children has continued to give a grant and individual members from the local branch have helped out in numerous ways. In 1993, members of the Regina branch successfully nominated Anne Luke for the "Fellowship of Man Award." Since the organization can no longer offer an annual grant to help with core funding for the Centre, members decided to form a partnership to explore other options of support. Special projects will be funded: for instance, this year funds are available to help develop the Parents' Resource Centre.

The Early Learning Centre is informally in touch with many nongovernmental agencies because it actively participates in the United Way fundraising campaigns. As well, in recent years the Centre has been encouraged to share resources with other agencies. Although the Centre's administrators agree with the spirit of this request, requests like this, while well meaning, often are not practical or simple to carry out. Even though membership in the United Way has meant a lot of commitments, especially speaking commitments for the Director at the time of the Annual Campaign, the Centre has benefited in many ways. Its profile within the city has been raised and it is part of a larger network of nongovernmental social service agencies, all with similar humanitarian aims.

Unlike the United Way, which is an umbrella organization to help raise and distribute funding, the constitution of many organizations does not allow them to provide ongoing core funding. The Kiwanis is a good example. Over the years, this service organization has funded different projects: three clubs got together and made the move to the present building possible. These clubs funded the renovations, which included providing a child's bathroom off every classroom. Since then, two of the clubs have continued to support the project — covering the rental costs of a van and the sponsorship of a child.

Apart from support from larger organizations, the Early Learning Centre's funding comes from a wide variety of sources. For example, a large number of local churches and religious orders give donations on a regular basis. (The present school building is rented from a religious order at a very modest cost.) From time to time, staff visit various congregations to show a video and talk about their work with preschoolers and families.

Individual donors also give on a regular basis; many of these are long-term supporters and faithfully send their annual cheques. Many donations are also made in kind — volunteers help out with a variety of tasks. The Centre's newsletter helps keep the donors and volunteers up-to-date and in touch with what is happening there.

The foregoing abbreviated account of the Early Learning Centre's links to its many communities begins to show the complex nature of this interdependence; some of the outreach is to get support but the Centre offers much inspiration, expertise and leadership in return.

Although the Early Learning Centre receives funding from the Department of Social Services, it exists in a kind of administrative limbo within the larger provincial administration. The Centre received funding as a pilot project from the Day Care Division of Social Services for over 12 years. While it was funded as a daycare, it is much more than that. It is an educational institution with a strong family support component. At present, no government department has a mandate to fund this type of preschool program; as a consequence, funding and wider administrative support networks continue to be a major problem.

FUNDING

Funding has always been and continues to be a major problem for the organization. At times, it is a major source of stress for the Director and Administrative Assistant. For instance, during the summer vacation in 1993, the Director learned that the Centre's application for one major grant had been turned down. The budget for the upcoming year anticipated this money, since until that point it had always been granted. The application had been turned down because of a misunderstanding about the previous year's financial statements. This misunderstanding cost the Director part of her vacation as well as considerable anxiety. In appealing the decision, she was assisted by a volunteer member of the Finance Committee. Because the appeal was successful, everyone could return peacefully to finish their vacations, if it had not been, the administrators and the Finance Committee would have had to scramble for alternate sources of funding.

Like most community and nongovernmental organizations, funding is provided by a number of sources and a considerable amount of staff and volunteer time and energy is spent in attempting to meet the basic financial needs of the organization. Initially, during its first year, the Early Learning Centre operated with private funding. During its second year, the Centre received funding through the Day Care Division of the Department of Social Services on a pilot project basis; the Centre received an operating grant and daycare subsidies for children attending the program. This funding arrangement caused many administrative difficulties for the Early Learning Centre and sometimes for the parents. Furthermore, it meant that the Centre was not recognized for the type of program it really is but was categorized as a daycare. In 1990, the Early Learning Centre began negotiations to change its funding arrangement with the Department of Social Services. In April 1993, the Early Learning Centre began to receive monthly grants from the Day Care Division of the Department of Social Services. This arrangement has meant less administrative work and more predictable grant amounts.

Provincial funding accounts for approximately 64% of the total budget. Other sources of funds include the city of Regina, the United Way of Regina, a variety of churches and community groups, several service clubs, a number of private donors and a variety of fundraising events.

In the two years that I spent as a participant observer at the Early Learning Centre, I judged that the burden of inadequate funding was far too great. Already the task of supporting children and families who have been condemned to live a life of poverty is great. When these two sources of stress are added together, the stress is often compounded. Although the staff never show any signs of dissatisfaction, the low salaries do not offer them any relief: many of them live at or

below the poverty line themselves. University-educated teachers, for example, earn considerably less than they would if they worked with one of the two local school boards.

The Early Learning Centre continues to survive, despite many funding struggles because the Director and staff feel that they need to help children from low-income homes. Given the inadequate funding and general lack of official support, it is unlikely that other institutions like the Early Learning Centre will be started — the toll in terms of lost income and added stress and anxiety is great. Given that there is a need for preschooling for many low-income children if they are to succeed in school and in life (and cost society less in the long run), the way forward seems obvious. Yet, governments are reluctant to take responsibility to relieve that burden of suffering of children born into poverty. To whom, within the community, should this responsibility fall?

AN UNFAIR START IN LIFE: WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT?

> The well-being of children and their families should be a provincial priority reflected in how we allocate our resources. (Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children, 1994, p. 28)

This imperative is one of the seven "beliefs, values and assumptions about children which underscores" any provincial action on behalf of children. In light of the support and funding that are available for the education and well-being of young children in the crucial preschool years, this declaration of belief seems hollow. Many concerned people to whom I spoke complained of a lack of will to alleviate the burden of poverty at the provincial level. No coordinated policy exists to tackle the problem of child poverty. Poor communities cannot improve the lot of their children without help from governments. No government department, however, has a mandate for the welfare of young children and even more specifically for preschooling, and although there is considerable goodwill on the part of individuals in government, no structures exist for early support programs.

Nor does the mandate exist at the municipal level, or at the level of school boards. This continues despite the fact that there is more than adequate research evidence to show that without high-quality preschooling, many children raised in poverty are destined for school failure. Hence, failing to fund preschooling is false economy and only delays that day when money will have to be spent by other departments such as Justice and Social Services. For governments to show leadership in these areas, individuals, agencies and entire communities have to speak up and lobby politicians for justice for poor children. This also means a more sensible and farsighted use of resources: money spent on prevention goes much further than it does when dealing with the consequences. On a human level, too, the mental and physical suffering is far less. As was discussed in Chapter Two, poor children suffer far more from physical and mental health problems and from the start are marginalized. A very simple but pertinent example of this suffering is the state of poor children's teeth. Recently, the children at the Early Learning Centre had a dental checkup. The nurse reported the preschoolers' had the worst teeth of any school in the city, save one. Some youngsters' teeth were in conditions that certainly must have been painful, yet they suffered in silence. This revelation has profound moral implications in addition to having consequences for learning, but it continues because there are very few to speak up for these children.

The previous section on community shows that there is considerable informal support for, and goodwill towards, the work of the Early Learning Centre. However, this support must be also accompanied by political lobbying to get governments to act to ensure that all children get at least a chance of starting life on a level field. Unless political action and education of the public go hand in hand with generosity and goodwill, the community's charity may inadvertently perpetuate a state of inequality by creating piecemeal or token solutions which can be held up

as examples of action. In future, to help and support children who are born into poverty, the various communities that support the Early Learning Centre need to go beyond charity.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have attempted to depict some of the links the Early Learning Centre has had with the community. Most immediately, it serves and is responsive to the Regina low-income community. It is governed by a Board that is made up principally of parents who come from, and represent, that community. Because the Centre has operated for over 17 years as a pilot project partly funded by the Department of Social Services, it does not have a supporting administrative network, so over time the Director and the staff have had to create and nurture a variety of informal networks.

The staff have also been compelled to do outreach work in the community because, each year, they have had to raise a significant proportion of their operating funds. The Director and staff receive support from many communities but increasingly they also assist many groups and agencies, especially those working for the welfare of children. Although working under a number of constraints, the Early Learning Centre is an excellent example of a community-based and community-supported organization.

One of the "Ten Criteria of Excellence in Preschooling" refers to the place of the preschool within the community and states that effective preschools must be: *holistic, culturally sensitive and cooperative*. By the standards of this criterion the Centre rates extremely well. The goals, policies and work carried out by the staff of the Early Learning Centre "take a holistic view of the child within the family, community and culture." As far as possible, the staff "work with other groups and agencies in the community to support the whole family." This approach to working with and being sensitive to the community is but an extension of the Centre's core values of mutuality and respect.

In the next and final chapter, I will synthesize some of the previous discussion by evaluating the Early Learning Centre in terms of the "Ten Criteria for Excellence in Preschooling." I will once again focus the reader's attention on the power and potential of preschooling by attempting to answer, "Why does preschooling work?" And I will end by pointing to future directions for preventative preschooling and family support, and for research on these topics.

CHAPTER EIGHT:
CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

INTRODUCTION

This Program Evaluation and Development Project had three objectives: 1) to evaluate the present preschool program including the family outreach program; 2) to work directly with the staff in the development and implementation of an improved program; and 3) to determine what effects the program has on the academic and social development of the preschool graduates in the long term. To this point in the report, the first two objectives have been addressed. The third objective will be addressed later in this chapter.

As the principal researcher for the project, I chose a participatory-action research model to carry out the investigation and to work with the staff to improve and develop the program. Not only did they find this method respectful and intellectually stimulating, but now that the project has ended, staff regularly say they miss having outsiders participating to initiate discussion and give a boost to program change and adjustment.

In presenting the results of this project, I have described and analyzed different aspects of what the Centre does. First, I presented an overview of the entire program offered by the Early Learning Centre. In Chapter Four, various program components — nutrition, transportation, classroom, family outreach — were listed and described. In addition, certain key features, such as the pivotal role of the Executive Director and her leadership style, were also discussed. Because I considered the classroom and family-outreach components to be the cornerstone of the Early Learning Centre's program, I devoted a separate chapter to presenting information on each of these.

In Chapter Five, when introducing life in the classroom, I first described the classroom structure, content and layout, as well as curriculum. In that chapter, issues such as Aboriginal content in the curriculum were also raised and discussed. This account of the classroom program, was brought to life in two vignettes narrating the stories of two typical children spending their day in the classroom. Following this account of programming for children, the outreach program for parents and families was presented and analyzed. Finally, I gave an account of the intricate relationships between the Centre and various sections of the community. After analyzing these networks and informal support systems, I raised the issue of who should be responsible for the welfare of children and act as advocates on their behalf.

The remainder of this chapter will consist of three parts: 1) an overview of how the Early Learning Centre meets the "Ten Criteria for Excellence in Preschooling"; 2) a brief explanation of why preschooling is so effective; and 3) future directions for the preschooling and other programs to support low-income children and families. Suggestions for further research will also be made.

EXCELLENCE IN PRESCHOOLING AND THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

In Chapter Two, a set of ten criteria for effective preschooling was drawn up. These standards were based on research and on similar criteria developed by the *Better Beginnings: Better Futures* (1990) team and Schweinhart et al. (1993); these criteria also mirror those of the *Saskatchewan Action Plan for Children* (1994). Within the limits of what is known about effective preschooling, I modified the criteria of these two teams of researchers to fit the resources available to the Early Learning Centre. Below I will list each of the "Ten Criteria for Excellence in Preschooling" and then compare each to the appropriate aspect of the Centre's program:

Explicit, developmentally appropriate, child-centred curriculum: Effective programs use explicitly stated, developmentally appropriate, active-learning curricula that support children's independence, self-esteem, problem solving, attention, choice and language development.

The Early Learning Centre's classroom program meets this criterion. The program is child-centred with an emphasis on active learning and on building autonomy and self-confidence. During activity time, the child is helped to be self-directed and to make choices. Achieving these objectives is an on-going process and every effort is made to help teachers to be mindful of the intent of this criterion both in their planning and in their interactions with the children.

Although lacking a control group, in my observations of a sample of children across the two-year period of this study, I saw definite growth in independence, self-control, social relations with other children and adults, attention span, problem solving, knowledge of books and writing, and in complexity of language and extent of vocabulary. In addition, children seemed to be generally more confident and at home in the classroom group, and to develop a sense of who they were and what they could do.

Well-trained and stable staff: Effective teaching staff have been trained in and have a special interest in early childhood education, and do not change jobs often.

Generally, the staff at the Early Learning Centre are well trained. In each classroom, there is a university-educated elementary teacher. The associate teacher receives a six-month on-the-job training. To a certain extent teachers also receive on-site training because universities usually do not prepare teachers for preschool positions. Teachers who transfer from work in schools are not always thoroughly familiar with a child-centred, active-learning approach.

Considering the often stressful nature of the work and the low rates of pay, staff at the Centre are amazingly stable and do not change jobs often. Earlier in the report, I explained this phenomenon partly by appealing to the respectful and mutually supportive yet light-hearted atmosphere evident in interactions among staff at all levels.

Vigilant but supporting administrators: Effective administrators provide support, encouragement and supervision for their staff's curriculum implementation; they also consult with staff and provide on-site in-service.

The two administrators support staff in many ways. The Director visits the classrooms regularly to stay in touch with new developments and methods, and to informally supervise classroom practices. Time is structured for consulting with staff to help them set goals and self-evaluate how these goals are being achieved. Regular goal-setting and planning meetings are held. In addition, opportunities are created for professional reading, discussion and sharing of ideas. New curriculum initiatives are usually successfully carried out because all of the staff are involved in making the decision and in developing or adapting the innovation. It is principally to support teachers with the implementation of new curriculum initiatives that the role of lead teacher has been created.

Staff are not only supported professionally. Because of the structure and philosophy of the Early Learning Centre, the staff are also supported if pressing issues arise in their personal lives. In addition, a pleasant social climate is created where all staff can relax together.

Low child-teacher ratio: Effective programs maintain classes of fewer than 20, three-to-five-year-olds for every pair of adults. (A lower ratio is desirable.)

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By this standard derived from research on "Head Start" programs in the United States, the Centre's child-teacher ration of 12 children to every pair of adults is low. Over the years, the Director and staff have come to realize that this low ratio is vitally important if children are to have individual adult attention every day. Moreover, in my observations I often judged that when some child or children were having particularly difficult days, a third adult in the room could have taken care of the disruptive child and allowed the other teachers to continue working with the other children. In addition, the number of newly enrolled children in a room is a significant factor in deciding on the optimum number of adults necessary.

Minimum of a year's duration: Effective programs are available to children for at least one year but preferably for two years.

The Early Learning Centre is available to low-income children for two years prior to kindergarten. Providing transportation makes the program accessible even to children who live in other areas of the city. Moreover, when children move during the school year, the school van simply picks them up at the new address.

Parents as partners, home visitation and communication: In effective programs, staff treat parents as partners and engage in outreach, such as home visits at least once a semester to learn from parents, to support them and to help them understand the curriculum and their child's development.

That the family-outreach program at the Centre meets this criterion is without doubt. In Chapter Six, I discussed the teachers' approach and respectful attitude towards parents. They believe that parents are the primary educators of their children.

Teachers make at least one home visit a semester and the focus of the visit is largely educational: they inform parents about what their child is doing at school and discuss his/her development. They also try to learn information relevant to the child's education and adjustment to the classroom.

In some programs, such as the Perry Preschool Project, home visits are made more often — sometimes as often as once a week. In these programs, this is possible because teachers only teach a half-day. Although more frequent visits are desirable, especially if teachers are to informally educate parents in childrearing and effective support of their children's education, visits once every semester help teachers to form a relationship with parents. In this way, they begin to identify with the work of the school. In general, parents and children enjoy the teachers' visits.

Growth in parent competence, involvement and confidence: In effective programs, parents gain competence by becoming more actively involved in their children's education at home and in school. They grow in confidence and control over their lives as they learn new skills either directly or indirectly by observing the teachers.

There is both direct and indirect evidence to show that parents who become more actively involved in their child's education while attending the Early Learning Centre go on to pursue other avenues of self-improvement and also continue to support their child's education. In interviews for this study, the testimonials of several past and present parents testify to the confidence and competence they gained from being involved either in the classrooms, governance or the general operation of the Centre. This process started for many when they realized that the teachers trusted and respected them. There is also some initial evidence to show that children of these parents stayed in school longer.

Relaxed but encouraging attitude towards parental involvement: In effective programs, parental and family involvement is encouraged by creating an atmosphere where they feel comfortable, by establishing personal relationships with parents and guardians, and by offering a variety of options for involvement. Although highly encouraged, involvement is not required.

All of the staff, including administrators, teachers and drivers, have a relaxed, respectful attitude towards families. They try to be sensitive to different styles of interaction as well as attempting to understand situations from the parents' point of view. Teachers and drivers, as far as possible, become familiar with a family's circumstances in order to understand the difficulties parents might have in attending special events. The staff also make every effort to establish a personal relationship with the family; once these bonds are formed, parents feel much more comfortable in the school.

A wide variety of options for involvement is offered and these events always contain some familiar element or topic to help parents feel relaxed. If they do not wish to become involved, they are not obliged to. For example, if parents consistently resist the setting up of an appointment for a home visit, teachers use their discretion and do not insist. To encourage and facilitate family involvement, the Early Learning Centre tries to supply transportation to and from events and have baby-sitting available during the events. However, it is not always possible to do this and as a result the involvement program becomes less accessible to many families.

Holistic, culturally sensitive and cooperative: Effective programs take an holistic view of the child within the family, community and culture. Because of this, these programs are sensitive to the children's culture and the framework of meaning learnt at home. They also work with other groups and agencies in the community to support the whole family.

This criterion is met in several different levels within the program. In the classroom curriculum and planning, the culture and background of the children is taken into account. The family-involvement program, by virtue of its very existence, views the child within the family. An examination of different aspects of this outreach program demonstrates their heritage.

That the entire program is embedded in many different communities is clear from the account of community in the previous chapter. Many aspects of the program exist because it is cooperative. In order to maximize the services they can bring to children, the staff cooperate with a wide variety of individuals and agencies. For the Early Learning Centre the need to cooperate is very real — it is underfunded and constantly has to seek funds and information about funding.

Flexible, self-evaluating and adjusting: Effective programs are flexible, open to change and constantly self-evaluating and adjusting to meet the changing needs of children, families and the community.

All aspects of the program at the Early Learning Centre are flexible, self-evaluating and adjusting. At several points during this report, I discussed aspects of the program that have been modified over time to reflect changing philosophies, staff knowledge, funding, locations, and so on. Throughout the study, I also described the structures that facilitate change, such as beginning and end-of-the-year planning, and reflection and team evaluations. In order to help staff make adjustments to the program, they need information. As a consequence, most workshops and in-service occur because of a need identified by staff. Once the staff have

enough information, the Director encourages them to implement the change. The lead teacher also guides this adjustment.

When the active phase of this project ended, I discussed my methods and the impact of the study on the program. To explain the research methods I used the spiral model of action research to demonstrate (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988, p. 11). This spiral feedback model brought instant recognition from the staff, who said that it explained to them exactly what they have been doing in the program since the beginning: "We try out something. If it works, we keep it; if it doesn't we change it and try something else."

The entire program at the Early Learning Centre is without any doubt whatsoever a *high-quality preschool program*. It meets all of the research-based criteria of excellence.

At present, we know a lot about how to make school a happy and successful experience for children raised in material poverty. That information has been provided by research carried out since the mid-1960s. More recently, we are also beginning to understand more clearly the exact nature of the links between high-quality preschooling and success in school and in adult life. This will be the subject of the next section.

AN EARLY START: WHY PRESCHOOLING WORKS

As the review of the literature in Chapter Two has shown, high-quality, active-learning programs can provide both short- and long-term benefits for children living in poverty and at risk of failing in school. Almost three decades of research makes it clear that preschooling does not break the cycle of poverty, but does help a much larger percentage of low-income children born into risk-filled environments, ease out of poverty. Most of the graduates of preschool are still poor people — few become well-to-do — but many gain greater social competence, self-reliance and resilience.

By analyzing the research literature from various fields — education (especially pre-schooling), psychology, and health (especially mental health) — it is possible to infer some of the causal links between high-quality preschooling and relative success in later life.

For an individual, the cycle of poverty often begins with school failure. Because of the structures, styles of interaction and formal nature of school, many children born into poverty come to school unprepared for the type of learning expected of them. Failure in the initial years of elementary school appears to set off a downward spiral of poor achievement, disinterest and lack of motivation towards school learning. Because the child fails in school, s/he acquires negative dispositions towards school and this attitude can lead to ever-increasing gaps between the child's intellectual potential and actual achievement. This cycle of school failure soon becomes a classic vicious circle. Failure sets off even deeper failure with all of the negative implications of poor self-concept. The negative image of him/herself acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy, not only for the young person but also for his/her teachers and peers.

For children and youth who are failing, school is not a pleasant place, so these youngsters quickly begin to look elsewhere for recognition and satisfaction. The street corner, local mall or back alley begin to beckon irresistibly. Before long, children begin to skip school, and eventually drop out before completing high school. Viewed statistically, dropping out of school has very negative social and economic consequences. A young person who leaves school early greatly increases his/her chances of being in trouble with the law, having unwanted pregnancies, being dependent on welfare, being unemployed, having unhappy relationships, and having both mental and physical health problems.

Attending a high-quality preschool for at least a year, and preferably two intervenes in this cycle of poverty and failure. As we have seen in the previous section when discussing the "Ten

Criteria for Excellence in Preschooling," young children who attend high-quality preschool acquire many skills, attitudes and dispositions that help them in achieving success as they enter school. Just as the negative effects of the cycle of failure are compounded over the years, the positive effects of school success, which are set in motion when children enter school with adequate preparation, are also multiplied over the years. Being successful in school increases students' chances of graduating from high school, holding a job, forming a family, not using drugs, and avoiding involvement in criminal activities. This sequence seems to be the account emerging from the research on the effects of high-quality preschooling. In the case of the Perry Preschool Project, these positive effects have lasted until age 27 — the age of the subjects at the latest stage in this longitudinal study. From my present investigations, there is also some evidence to show that preschoolers who attend the Early Learning Centre benefit both in the short term and in the long term from attending preschool.[5]

One of my research assistants and I interviewed teachers in five of the schools attended by the children when they left the Centre. All of the kindergarten teachers said that they could identify children who had attended the Early Learning Centre. The most remarkable characteristics commented on by teachers were social competence, attention span, language and literacy development, and initiative. However, as children continued on to the upper grades, teachers did not find it as easy to pick out graduates of the preschool program. Many teachers remarked that in order to retain the head start gained in preschool, other support systems should be available for the family, especially in times of crisis.

Parents whose children attended the Early Learning Centre felt that their children had gained a lot of knowledge and skills. I spoke to three mothers who were able to make comparisons within their own families between those children who had attended the preschool and those who had not; those who had attended were successful in school and liked it. All three mothers had at least one child who had not attended the Centre; these children were all less successful in school.

In addition to the accounts of the teachers and the parents, my research assistants and I interviewed 15 past students of the Centre. Although for many of them the memory had dimmed, they all could recall pleasant experiences such as painting, outings and dressing up. Some also had happy memories of the summer recreational program.[6] Among these past students, two had graduated from high school and one had attended some classes at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (affiliated with the University of Regina). It was difficult for these past students to be precise about what they had gained from attending the Early Learning Centre. However, in reading over the interviews and in inferring from the students' manner, the gains seemed to be in terms of positive dispositions and attitudes towards school, and an optimistic outlook on life. Although some of the data is anecdotal in nature, it mirrors very closely the results of larger-scale studies.

Earlier in this discussion, I identified some of the components of what I called "the cycle of success." Now I would like to examine more closely some of the links in this chain of events. Gains in intellectual performance seem to be one of the early links in the chain (see Schweinhart et al., 1993). In contrast, the long-term gains of all "Head Start" type programs seem to be increased social competence (Zigler, 1995). Because of increases in intellectual achievement, children enter school more confident and primed for success. This competence, which includes

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5 This part of the data collection was the focus of the third objective of this Program Evaluation and Development Project.

6 Because of a lack of resources, the summer recreational program is no longer offered.

better attention and attitudes towards learning, breeds both success and increased expectations of success. Almost simultaneously, these gains in intellectual functioning translate into greater motivation to success at school.

Along with success comes greater affective bonds between the child and his/her teachers and the school. This positive identification between the children and the source of their self-esteem and satisfaction is also a pull away from the world of the street. Stated differently, it is the strength of these bonds that keeps youngsters engaged in school and away from delinquent activity.

Preschool creates a more conducive environment for intellectual, social and emotional development. As children gain more competence, they themselves become a positive influence on creating their own environment. An example of this is when children gain more knowledge and competence, their parents begin to enjoy them more and spend more time with them. This phenomenon was also pointed out to me by one of the community nurses who had an opportunity to observe the children interact with their parents at home.

Parents are also a very important causal link in explaining the cycle of school success. In addition to spending more time talking to their children and doing things with them, parents also have raised expectations for their children as a result of participating in their child's preschooling. Of the 58 preschool parents who were interviewed for this study, all said that they wanted their children to finish school and get a job. (Some spontaneously mentioned that they did not want their children to be on welfare.) Only three of the parents mentioned specific jobs that they would like their children to have. When I discussed the results with the Director, she was very pleased that the parents were unanimous in their desire to have their children complete their education.

In addition to the boost that these heightened anticipations give to the child's chances for success in school, s/he also benefits from the parents' gains in confidence and competence. As parents become more competent in child-rearing, and as a result adopt a more confident attitude, they also approach school and schooling with more confidence. The children's confidence is boosted as they necessarily absorb the parents' less cautious and less deferential approach to educational institutions. In addition, greater use of community resources by parents for their children is another plus for these children.

All in all, it is probable that parents who participate actively in preschool programs help their children by modeling the preschool teachers' use of language and interactions with children. This bridging between home and school is also accomplished as parents structure the home environment more by setting limits, such as the amount and type of television viewed. To be more in control of the home environment, parents need some relief from the overwhelming burdens of poverty and child-rearing.

Studies in the mental health literature show that parents who get some relief in child-rearing — for example, an opportunity to spend some time away from their children — create a healthier and more stable environment. Rutter's (1985) large-scale study in England showed that the risk of mental health problems in children was linked to the availability of occasional relief for parents. When participating in preschool programs, adults get this relief. This helping hand for parents creates a better atmosphere and less discord in the home; in turn, this improved emotional climate assists in the formation of stronger ties of affection between parents and children and among siblings. In addition, children who attend high-quality preschools generally tend to form warm relationships with their teachers.

It is the ability to form strong, supportive personal relationships that seems to be one of the greatest predictors of resilience (Werner, 1993), the quality that allows people to bounce back

from the knocks and blows of life. Resilience is also involved in decision making in times of crisis: disaster strikes, but given time, the person can bounce back enough to make sensible decisions that will avert further catastrophes. Resilient individuals seem to have acquired some protective factors that allow them to negotiate their way through difficulties and potential risks and still feel positive about life. Although forming strong supportive emotional ties with at least one other individual is probably the principal root of resilience, cognition also seems to have a formative role.

Similar to the link between increased intellectual achievement in preschool and increased social competence in later life, there also appears to be cognitive underpinnings in the formation of resilience. These underpinnings are probably reinforced by an active learning preschool curriculum, because resilience seems to require problem-solving, perseverance or some kind of consistent effort in overcoming difficulties. Independence, self-efficacy and self-confidence — qualities which are required to keep going when the odds seem to be negative — are fostered in a high-quality preschool curriculum.

Linking insights gained from studies of preschooling with those gained from other influential investigations like the Kauai longitudinal study (Werner, 1993), resilience seems to be one of the major protective factors that preschooling gives children born into risk-filled environments.

In offering the foregoing account of why preschooling works for a large percentage of low-income children, I run the risk of oversimplifying a highly complex and interwoven series of reactions. For instance, I have not mentioned the role of cultural identity and pride in one's heritage in the formation of resilience. Acquiring this type of cultural pride and identity early in life is, without a doubt, one of the major protective outcomes of a culturally appropriate preschool. Since such a high proportion of the children attending the Early Learning Centre come from First Nations and Metis backgrounds, this topic should become the subject of further research. Further directions for policy and research will be the topic of the next and final section.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN PRESCHOOLING

> Our goal is healthier, happier Saskatchewan children, stronger families, and a province in which all members live productive lives.
>
> Our children are our hope and our future. Our humanity, compassion and wisdom can be measured by how we care for our children. (Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children, 1994)

As the account in the previous chapter and the quotes above make clear, there is no lack of goodwill in this province on the part of individuals, organizations, communities and governments to improve the lot of low-income children. However, the result, even with these combined efforts, is piecemeal. Perhaps it would be too harsh to judge these as mere guilt-resolving tokens: after all something is better than nothing.

The time has come to act on behalf of poor children and families. To wait any longer would be extremely short-sighted. We are all aware of the economics of preschooling. The Perry Preschool Project, for example, has shown that over the lifetime of the past-pupils, high-quality programming returns an estimated $7.16 for every dollar spent on preschooling. This profit is from savings in reduced social welfare, justice and health costs, because an active learning preschooling helps individuals to be more socially competent.

To appeal only to economic arguments, however, is to deny our humanitarian obligations and to ignore the heavy burden of both physical and mental suffering carried by a large proportion of children and families in our city and province. Because of this, the first and strongest argument for preschooling should be for reasons of social justice and equity. The second and related argument should be about the loss of fulfilled individuals and human

resources. Finally, the third argument should be the appeal to economic gains. However, in a developed country like Canada, suffering as a result of child poverty is shameful and should never be allowed to happen.

At present, there is a need for advocacy on behalf of children. Knowledge and goodwill need to be translated into action and policy changes. That this knowledge and goodwill can be translated into action for children and families has been shown in this report on the Early Learning Centre. The Centre can act as both a source of knowledge and inspiration to those who wish to make a difference to children's chances for a better future.

In the remainder of this section I will list some of the issues that have arisen as a result of this project. These issues need to be tackled if we are to set up preschools for children in poverty. While limiting my discussion to preschooling, I am aware that it is only a small part of the support system, and structural changes are needed if we are to make any serious attempts to end poverty. For example, preventative support programs should start at the prenatal stage, continue throughout preschool and be extended upwards into schooling (Zigler, 1995).

The issues in preschooling will be dealt with under two headings — policy issues and issues related more directly to the future of the Early Learning Centre. Finally, some areas for further research will be listed.

Policy Issues

The ten policy issues which I will list below are not new, and are only too familiar to those trying to fight inequality and child poverty. In 1994, the *Saskatchewan Action Plan for Children* outlined some principles and goals to guide provincial funding of programs for children. This action statement is admirable in many ways. However, to benefit children it must be translated into action.

The general issues that I will raise are not in any way meant to be comprehensive but are those which emerged as a result of this assessment of the Early Learning Centre:

1. There is an absence of a comprehensive policy towards supporting families and meeting children's needs. This policy needs to be very wide in scope and include underlying structural issues like child poverty.
2. The formulation of a realistic policy to support children requires a needs assessment. It would not cost very much to survey a representative sample of families and communities. One of the questions answered during the "gathering" held as part of the data collection for the present project, concerned services besides preschooling that parents would like so that children "can grow up healthy and happy." (See the fourth question in Appendix 8).
3. A list of priorities in providing services to children should be drawn up. Some services are an absolute necessity. For example, without adequate nutrition and health care at the pre- and post-natal stages, it is impossible to prevent later developmental problems.
4. Requesting that services be community-run should not be taken as an excuse for lack of leadership and support at a higher level of government. Communities in urgent need of services for children and families can act only if the supports discussed above and adequate funding are made available.
5. In recent years, statements about the ultimate right of families to control their children's education have been used as an excuse for official inaction in many countries. Hackneyed phrases like the "sacred nature of the family" are often bandied about. In the light of what we now know about children's development, it is time to go beyond this "hands-off" approach and find sensible and sensitive ways to work with families to support children. We must

realize that the family is sacred only so long as it is supported, otherwise it could easily turn into hell.

6. There is an urgent need for culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate (Morissette et al., 1993) programming for First Nations and Metis children. At the preschool level very few curriculum supports exist.

7. Preschools exist in an administrative vacuum. For example, there needs to be far more communication and continuity between schools and preschools.

8. Although, at present, preschool staff feel isolated and would like more continuity for their students between the two stages of education, they fear that if preschooling were to become part of the regular school system it could run the risk of becoming impersonal and bureaucratized.

9. Two related issues are the provision of preschooling for all children regardless of the parents' financial circumstances versus the fear of ghettoizing poor children through special programs like preschooling. The implications of these issues need to be debated but are clearly related to questions of funding. In some European countries like Denmark and Holland, high-quality preschooling is provided for all children regardless of means. In Reggio Emilia, a wealthy city in northern Italy, a very high proportion of the municipal budget supplements national funding to provide innovative and creative preschooling which the city considers the *right* of *all* children.

10. There is a need to recognize the valuable contribution of those who work in early education and in child care. There are several ways to grant this overdue recognition. The first and most straightforward way is by providing adequate salaries and benefits. It is shameful and dismissive of the professionals' and paraprofessionals' efforts that their work and expertise is worth so little. Inadequate salaries, however, are only a symptom of a much larger issue, which is the lack of will to act on behalf of children in poverty.

Issues Related to the Early Learning Centre

All of the issues raised above impinge on the work of the Centre. In fact, a start could be made in resolving some of these issues by looking to the Early Learning Centre for expertise, suggestions and inspiration.

The feeling of isolation is perhaps one of the most pressing issues for the Centre's staff. It has existed as a pilot project for over 17 years without an adequate support network to extend the services it can provide for children. The supports available, while very much appreciated, tend to be token in nature.

Health care is an example of this lack of adequate support. Two nurses from the city's Sunrise Health Program visit the school and are concerned about the children's welfare. Because of lack of resources, however, it is very difficult for them to look after all the health needs. For instance, there is a very pressing need to have the children's teeth taken care of, but at present there is no agency to turn to for this service.

The staff often feel frustrated and limited in the scope of the needs they can fill for children. For example, many of these needs are the results of inadequate prenatal care for the mother; by the time the child comes to the Early Learning Centre, the staff are already curing wounds instead of building on earlier preventative programs. Child poverty is the underlying issue and the staff continue to struggle with it. There are so many needs and so many children in need; having to say "No" to hundreds of children each year is also an issue for the staff.

Poor salaries is another issue with which the staff continue to struggle. I think that granting these professionals and paraprofessionals adequate and stable remuneration for their work

would be a mark of recognition and perhaps contribute to lessening stress. In any case, it would give their morale a huge boost.

This recognition is long overdue since some of these staff have spearheaded the creation of preschooling and family-support programs for low-income children. When the Early Learning Centre opened its doors over 17 years ago, it was the first high-quality preschool for these children and it continues to be one of the pioneers in the province.

Future Directions for Research in Preschooling

Since most of the research results now available come from the studies carried out with low-income, inner-city children in the United States, there is a need to replicate this work in Canada. More specifically, it would be informative to carry out a follow-up longitudinal study, similar to the Perry Preschool Project, on children who had attended the Early Learning Centre.

At present, as part of the *Better Beginnings: Better Futures* project in Ontario, research is being carried out on community-based early supports for children. This research work needs to be built upon in order to create a body of Canadian data. For instance, more in-depth research could be carried out on ways to communicate with parents in order to help them support their children's learning. Helping parents to formulate and visualize educational plans for their children could be an example of this more focussed research.

In the context of Western Canada, research needs to be carried out on providing appropriate preschooling and support systems for First Nations and Metis children. Many parents of children who attend the Early Learning Centre would like their children to learn about their cultural heritage and to speak an Aboriginal language. However, because of lack of curriculum resources, it is very difficult to respond to the parents' request. A method for teaching Cree and other First Nations languages to young children is urgently needed. This and other curriculum resources could be developed and piloted.

Finally, research needs to be carried out on the type of preparation and training needed to work successfully with both the child in the classroom and the parents at home. At present, few third-level teacher education programs include preparation to work with parents, especially in planning family-outreach events and experiences.

PARTING WORDS

This report started with the history and philosophy of the Early Learning Centre and ended with an account of the issues in policy and research which must be addressed. To end, I would like to bring the readers full circle and have their attention once again focus on the original philosophy of mutuality and respect which still permeates the entire program. This vision and the mission of the Centre are kept alive because the staff revisit them often. In spite of this constant foundation, the Centre's program is not static but is adapted to fit ever-changing circumstances.

It is this flexibility and willingness to change that helps keep the Early Learning Centre such a vital place in the face of so many odds. Although, at times, the staff feel that their efforts are only a "drop in the ocean," the story told in this report shows that they are opening the doors of hope and possibility for many children.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1:
A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF CHILDREN ATTENDING THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

Written and Researched by Mary Ann McGrath

As was suggested in Chapter Two, child poverty is a serious problem. Current research suggests that Regina's child-poverty rate is higher than the national average. In 1989, 27% of Regina children under the age of 7 (5,536 children) lived below the Statistics Canada Low Income Cut-Off (LICO), Canada's most commonly accepted poverty line (Geller, Joel, Moryski, 1993).

The children at the Early Learning Centre are drawn from this group. This section will attempt to give a clearer picture of the environment these children come from by examining in more detail the available demographic information. Data were collected from the enrollment forms of children who attended the program in the past two years (September 1992 to June 1994). However, children who were enrolled after October 31, 1994 were not included. Information was collected from a total of 198 children. Income levels and sources, the number of Aboriginal children and family type, as well as information which demonstrates some of the particular stresses facing these families and the difficulties and challenges involved in working with this population will be examined. Where appropriate, this information will be compared to statistical information about children in Regina in general.

INCOME LEVELS AND SOURCES

Until September 1993, children attending the Early Learning Centre were determined to be eligible for enrollment if they qualified for a full day-care subsidy. In April 1993, the Early Learning Centre's funding contract with the provincial Department of Social Services changed. The current Early Learning Centre policy is that at least 75% of the children must come from families whose gross monthly income does not exceed $1,530 (the maximum amount a family can earn and still qualify for a full day-care subsidy). The remaining 25% are eligible if they fall below the LICO. In fact, in almost all cases families with children in the program have incomes at or below the lower of the two levels.

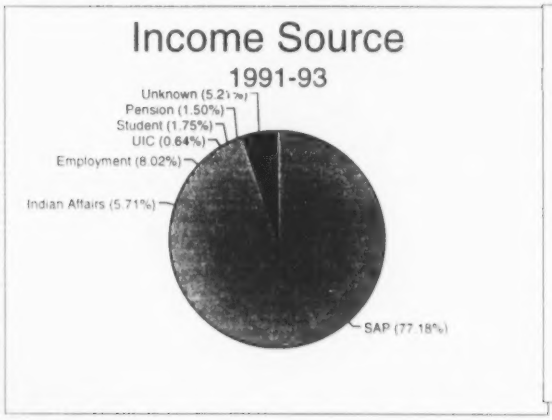

Figure 1.
Explanation of terms: UIC = Unemployment Insurance; SAP = Saskatchewan Assistance Plan; IA = Assistance received from the Department of Indian Affairs. Source: Early Learning Centre.

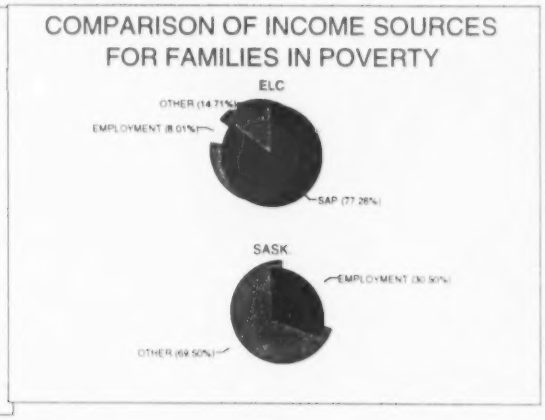

Figure 2.

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The majority of families (78%) whose children attend the Early Learning Centre are recipients of the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan (SAP). Figure 1 illustrates income sources for families.

In Saskatchewan, welfare payment levels fall well below all commonly accepted poverty lines. In 1989, a two-parent family with two children who received welfare had a total annual income which was $8,339 below the LICO (the family would receive 66% of the LICO). A lone-parent family with one child received a total annual income $4,504 below the LICO (the family would receive 72% of the LICO) (Geller et al., 1993). The implication for children attending the Early Learning Centre is that the majority of them live well below the poverty line.

It is very difficult to quantify the severity of poverty. It has become common to refer to indicators of hunger and the inability of individuals or families to adequately meet this most basic of human needs as an indicator of the severity of poverty. Hunger is an increasingly visible problem in Regina. In 1992, 88,788 visits were made to the Foodbank and 84% of families using the Food Bank were SAP recipients (Geller et al., 1993). The past ten years have also seen the development and spread of both community and school-based programs to feed hungry children in Regina. The Mayor's Board of Inquiry into Hunger in Regina (1989) found that:

> More than 50% of the groups and agencies which participated in the inquiry said that inadequate welfare rates are a major contributor to the increase in poverty and hunger in the city in recent years. They said that most people on welfare these days are suffering extreme hardship ... for the vast majority there is no choice but to use public food programs and even then hunger is commonplace.

Research suggests a significant number of poor families have at least one family member employed: in 1986, 30.5% of poor families were classed as working poor (Geller et al., 1993). This differs significantly from the Early Learning Centre total of 8% employed. The reasons for this discrepancy are unclear. However, because the Early Learning Centre provides a part-time program rather than a full-time daycare, and because in the past participating families were ineligible to receive another daycare subsidy in order to attend a daycare centre, the Early Learning Centre has not always been able to accommodate the needs of working parents.

FIRST NATIONS AND METIS CHILDREN

Across Canada, First Nations and Metis children face a much greater likelihood of living in poverty than the rest of the population: "This fact is borne out in research sponsored by the Laidlaw Foundation which suggests that 51% of all aboriginal children are living in poverty and that the figure is not significantly different between children living on-reserve and off-reserve (cited in Child Poverty Action Group, 1986). The same trend exists in Regina. In 1982, 76% of all Aboriginal households in Regina were below the poverty line and only one in ten Aboriginal households led by a lone parent lived above the poverty line (Geller et al., 1993, p. 27). Figure 2 illustrates the ethnic background of children who attend the Centre.

Given Regina's population, the fact that 76% of the children attending the Centre are First Nations and Metis is high. According to 1993 figures on enrollments in Community Schools, 41% of the students in Regina's community schools are Aboriginal. Only one school in Regina (Albert School) has a higher level of First Nations or Metis students than the Early Learning Centre (according to figures on community schools, Albert School has 79.9% of students who are First Nations or Metis).

FAMILY TYPE AND SIZE

Within Canada, the last 50 years have seen a number of changes in family structure and composition. Of particular concern has been the growth in the number of lone-parent families (the vast majority of which are headed by women). Lone-parent families are particularly vulnerable to poverty. While 30% of all Saskatchewan families are poor, 61% of all families

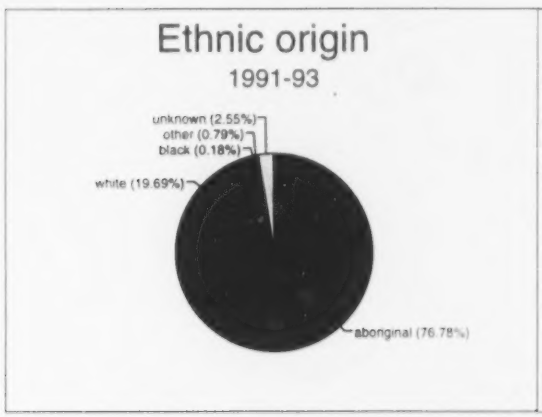

Figure 3.

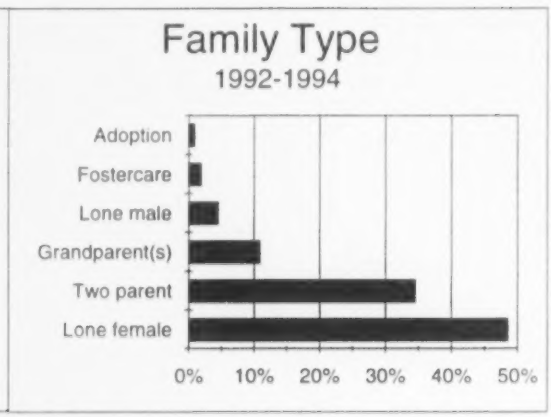

Figure 4.

headed by a lone female are poor. As well, 43% of families headed by a person less that 25 years of age live in poverty (Geller et al., 1993). Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of families types of children attending the Early Learning Centre.

The number of children who live with their grandparent(s) is notable (10%). The fact that the statistics, reviewed when writing this report, do not tabulate the frequency of extended family members caring for young children suggests that this type of family structure is being overlooked and/or that in the general population this type of family structure is relatively rare.

The extended family is extremely important in First Nations and Metis cultures. The involvement of grandparents in the care of their grandchildren is an accepted tradition. The vast majority of children living with grandparents are First Nations and Metis (15 out of 16 cases). It is also possible that in a number of these cases, care by an extended family member has taken the place of children being apprehended and placed in foster homes. However, Early Learning Centre records in no way document whether this is the case or not.

The families of children attending the Early Learning Centre tend to be somewhat larger than the Canadian average. Statistics Canada (1989) suggests that in Saskatchewan, the average family size is 3.2 individuals and the average number of children per family is 1.3. The average family size of children attending the Early Learning Centre is 4.9. The average number of children in families is 3.2.

INVOLVEMENT WITH OTHER AGENCIES

Children in poverty are more likely to come in contact with the Child Welfare system. Between 1991 and the present, 25 children (13.1%) have been active child-protection cases and 7 of these children (3.3%) have been in either temporary or permanent foster care.

Children were also involved with a number of other agencies and programs including Child and Youth, Wascana Rehabilitation Centre, Early Childhood Intervention Program, Peyakowak, Riel Local, Merici Centre, Safe Shelter, and so on. However, at least 40% of parents report no involvement with other agencies.

ISOLATION AND MOBILITY

Living in poverty often means a life of isolation and frequent moving. For children, changing residence often means being forced to leave behind their friends, schools and recreational acitivities and start over in a new community. The Early Learning Centre, as a matter of policy, attempts to accommodate the high mobility rate of families. Figures from Saskatchewan's community schools suggest that accommodating the needs of the many children who do not remain in one school for a whole year is a major concern. At the Early Learning Centre, whenever possible, children who move within the city or who change households (for example, go into foster care, move to grandparents' home, move temporarily into a safe shelter) are allowed to remain in the program if driving schedules can be adjusted. While constant moving is highly stressful to families, accommodating changes in moving takes considerable administrative time for the Early Learning Centre, since 30% of the children move at least once during the year. Similarly, a significant number of children, for a variety of reasons, leave the program during the course of the year (typical reasons include moving out of the city, moving back to the reserve, domestic disruptions in which a parent does not want any contact with a former partner, changing daycare needs). In 1992-93, 127 children attended the Early Learning Centre although there are only 96 spaces in the program. The process of enrolling new children and of rearranging driving schedules occupies considerable administrative time.

Many poor families are also quite isolated. For the families, isolation and lack of contact with outside support can add considerably to the stress of poverty. For the Early Learning Centre, simply contacting and communicating with families can be a challenge, since 32% of the families with children attending the Early Learning Centre have no home phone. As well, the addresses and phone numbers of children on the waiting list have often changed before their names reach the top. Although an attempt to reach these families is made, the staff is not always successful.

LENGTH OF TIME IN PROGRAM

The Early Learning Centre considers that two years' attendance in the program would provide the maximum benefit. However, as was mentioned earlier, many children do not remain in the program for that length of time. As well as wanting as many children as possible to attend for two years, the staff attempt to maintain a balance between the number of three-year-olds and the number of four-year-olds in the program. Figure 5 illustrates the length of time children, who were enrolled in 1992-93, attended the Early Learning Centre.

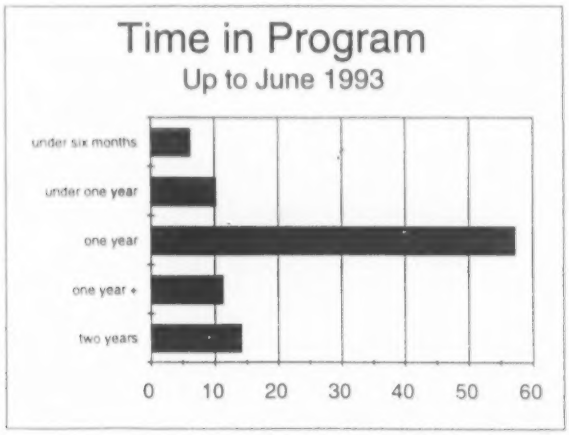

Figure 5.

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AREA OF THE CITY

The Early Learning Centre began in the north-central area of Regina. As enrollment grew, and due to the high mobility rates of families, the Centre began to provide transportation to children in other parts of Regina. There is a balancing act that must occur when deciding between those areas to which the Centre can realistically provide transportation, and where children who are eligible for the program live.

When comparing information about Centre families to information from the *State of Regina's Children: A Statistical Profile*, it is clear that families are residing in areas of the city that have higher levels of low-income residents, higher concentrations of Aboriginal families and higher concentrations of lone-parent families. None of the children attending the Centre come from the Regina communities which the *State of Regina's Children* indicate are the most uniformly middle class. The north-central community, from which the largest number of children comes, has the highest percentage of lone-parent families (24%), the highest percentage of Aboriginal families, the second highest unemployment rate (48%), and a 30% poverty rate (Geller et al., 1993). In practical terms, the wide area from which children are drawn means many logistical difficulties and financial costs result when transporting children to the program.

APPENDIX 2:
PROGRAM CRITERIA: BETTER BEGINNINGS, BETTER FUTURES

PROGRAM DESIGN

- Available for a minimum of two years.
- An "holistic" approach to the child and family.
- Flexible and open to change to meet the child's and family's needs as they become apparent.
- Emphasizing health and education, rather than pathology.
- Well-developed curriculum, with clearly stated goals, carefully implemented and thoroughly evaluated. The content of the program is not as important as how it is done.
- An emphasis on meeting the developmental needs of the preschool child, including programming to encourage independence, self-esteem, effective problem-solving skills, attention and task persistence.
- Community needs assessment and cooperation of the community in program design and development.
- Planning, in collaboration with existing resources in the community, to avoid overlapping services and to promote cooperation.
- Integrated with other helping resources and services in health, housing, education, social assistance and employment.
- Continuity from infant programs to preschool programs, and from preschool programs to primary school programs.
- A reasonable, complex and well-designed evaluation.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

- A child-parent drop-in centre, available on the same premises and linked to the program so parents can be comfortable coming with their other younger children or with their preschoolers when they are not in their designated time in the program.
- Parent support and the opportunity for time away from the children.
- Responsiveness to the needs of "special" children, and the ability to integrate them into the program (with consultation from appropriate outside agencies).
- Promotion of family involvement without requiring it. Family involvement must be seen as non-threatening.
- Relevance of programs for economically disadvantaged families, e.g., employment support and literacy, as well as parent/child training.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

- Open year round, and involving an outdoor summer program.
- A flexibly arranged full and half-day program.
- Qualified staff, experienced in their areas of input to the children.
- Staff knowledge of the community.
- Encouragement of staff participation in management.
- Adequate preparation time for staff.
- Ratios of staff to pupil not to exceed five children to one staff in the daycare of preschool setting.
- Fostering parents' involvement within the management of the program.

APPENDIX 3:
QUARTERLY REPORTS

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 8, 1992

TO: Anne Luke, Executive Director,
Central Regina Early Learning Centre

FROM: Mary Cronin

RE: Quarterly Progress Report of the Program Evaluation Project

****

I have written this progress report in four sections. The sections summarize:

I The review of the literature that has been carried out and the progress made towards setting up a theoretical framework.

II My general observations of the Early Learning Centre (ELC).

III Some special programs and items for discussion that were introduced to the staff.

IV Home visits carried out by the family outreach research assistant.

I

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL CONCERNS

Early Intervention Programs

I have reviewed the literature concerning successful early intervention Programs. The following is a brief summary:

Research in the area of pre-school preventative programming for pre-school low-income children has been both extensive and systematic. Some of this research has also been longitudinal and followed children who have received specialized help in their early years into adulthood. All the research reviewed indicated

that children definitely benefit from high quality pre-school programming and the benefits are not, as might have been expected, in the area of school achievement or measured intelligence but in psychosocial, social and economic gains.

Adults who have experienced success in their early childhood years are more likely to be resilient and less vulnerable when they experience crises or traumas later in life. In keeping with these findings, research in juvenile delinquency has shown early childhood intervention programs to be very promising preventative measures. For instance, the Perry Preschool Program conducted a long-term follow-up stud on the social and economic well-being of its pre-school graduates. Although the follow-up sample is small, the data is compelling: At age nineteen, pre-school graduates when compared to the control subjects had higher rates of employment, higher average incomes, more money saved and higher job satisfaction. In addition, graduates were self-supporting and fewer made use of social service programs. Graduates levels of anti-social behavior and misconduct was less, for example, fewer arrests and court appearances.

Parental involvement in pre-school programs has been shown to be important but not essential. Successful pre-school programs seem to cause small positive changes in the behavior of parents, for example, increased use of community health services and improved child rearing practices. Experience has also shown that active outreach to parents is important: it is important to visit parents in their homes.

Despite the animated controversy which has centred around curriculum design and content, the research that I have reviewed indicates that the "perfect curriculum" does not exist. This finding coincides with some of my early observations at the ELC: observations of the children learning in the classrooms and the feedback from parents seems to indicate that the important ingredient is not curriculum content, but the social relations that are established while the curriculum is being implemented.

Bringing the World of Home and School Closer for the Child

Based on the work of Shirley Brice Heath, George and Louise Spindler and other anthropologists of education, a child's education and schooling should be viewed in the contexts of his/her home and the broader community. The values, experiences and expectations that a child brings to school exert a powerful influence on whether the child gains from his/her school experience. To account for the different and sometimes competing influences of home and school in the life of the child, I have adopted a socio-cultural framework to analyze and interpret my observations. In addition to helping me understand the relationship between home and the child's classroom, this framework has also helped me understand why native teachers found it difficult to adjust to the egalitarian working conditions at the ELC despite an abundance of goodwill and effort on both sides.

Native Consciousness and Styles of Interaction

Although the ELC was set up to provide a pre-school program for all low-income children who are at risk for educational and

social failure, eighty per cent of the children who attend at present are from Aboriginal backgrounds; six staff are also from Native backgrounds. Before informed decisions can be made about race relations and the integration of aboriginal content into the curriculum, solid non sentimental information must be collected; because of this, I have attempted to describe notions such as Native spirituality, Native learning styles, Native story structure and Native styles of interaction. I have pursued this information through both library research and using human resources (example, faculty of Saskatchewan Federated Indian College). My initial research have led me to set up tentative descriptive categories such as "tolerance", an "ethic of non-interference" and "communal shame" to explain issues such as child rearing practices and cross-cultural misunderstandings.

II

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

In my first three months at the ELC I have become familiar with every aspect of the program. I have visited all the classrooms, gone on field trips, read all the curriculum materials, attended many sub-committee meetings and the Annual General Meeting (to understand the administrative structure); I regularly take part in staff meetings; planning sessions and in services! In addition I was a part of two interviews to hire new staff members: one in September to fill the position of research assistant (family outreach worker) and the second recently to select a new teacher. I have also established rapport with and

carried out initial interviews with all the staff members: the director, assistant director, teachers, associate teachers, accountant, cook and drivers.

Because of these initial observations I have come to some tentative conclusions:

1. The curriculum can be described as a "curriculum of consensus". All who work at the ELC have a very definite sense of the curriculum, especially what it should not be. The curriculum is not written as a single unit but exists in various documents, and in teachers beliefs and practice. The ground work for the curriculum is established every year during the planning meeting at the end of August where teachers and associates set their goals for the year in accordance with the Centre's mission statement.
2. As far as possible staff are involved in all planning and decision making as a result everyone including the drivers do their work enthusiastically. Because of this "total quality management" style of administration, staff seem to have a sense of control over their own destinies (ownership). Another salient feature of the administration is careful planning of meetings and functions, among other things, this planning conveys the message that people's time is considered valuable.
3. Far too much time and nervous energy is expended in fund raising. In the next few months, I plan to quantify the proportion of time and energy spent in fund raising.

III

SPECIFIC INITIATIVES INVOLVING STAFF

Because I have been around the ELC since the beginning of the school year, I have acted as a resource person for the administrators and teachers. In addition to being able to be of assistance, this has allowed me to observe firsthand some of the daily pressures experienced by the staff. To supplement these observations I have also initiated the following projects and discussions with the teachers and associates:

1. Because of the unhappy resignation of a Native teacher who started work only in September, I planned and helped and implement a week-long "New Teacher" orientation program. Staff were involved in every step in the planning; the feedback from the new staff member who participated in this program (and who is also Native) has been very positive. In January 1993, staff will again be presented with the next to final draft of the orientation program for their comments. (It will also be discussed with members of the Native community).
2. Two teachers have been helping me collect observational data on the language, cognitive, social and literacy development of a group of three and four year olds. I have designed checklists to assist them in their observations. Next semester all teachers will be involved in collecting data.
3. I have discussed certain refinements to the curriculum with the teaching staff, example, integrating functional literacy into daily class routines. A workshop has been planned for

the new year. Some joint workshops will also be planned with teachers from Kitchener community school.

IV

CONTACT WITH PARENTS

In September I was a member of the interview board that hired Carol Ledoux, my research assistant/family outreach worker. (This hiring brought to the surface some underlying racial tensions which I will write about in more detail at a later date). In the two months since she was hired Carol, has carried out twenty-five home visits with parents. She reports that the those who have been interviewed have given very positive feedback about the ELC: parents are pleased to have their children attend and are very happy with the transportation program. In the interviews carried out so for the parents seem to be moderately interested in introducing more native content into the curriculum.

Some of the parents interviewed are parents who have had other children in the ELC; all these have reported that their children are doing well in school because they had a headstart. Carol reports that as a result of her home visits she feels that from the point of view of the parents that, "the ELC fulfills an educational need for children of low-income families."

Carol has also collected the names of some past-pupils of the ELC; she plans to do some follow-up interviews with the parents, teachers and students.

V

CONCLUSION

All of the topics summarized in this progress report will be addressed in more detail in the final report. Some such as, the curriculum, will be the topic for discussion with the teachers and the associates in the New Year. Next semester also, Carol Ledoux and I will work on a framework in which to discuss "native styles of interaction" and the possible impact these styles have on building relationships with the children and parents.

Among the new topics that I will explore starting in January 1993 are: support systems for teachers in the classroom and in the community; and changes in the philosophy and program of the Early Learning Centre as it grew over the past fifteen years.

I hope that this report gives you an overview of the program evaluation in its first three months.

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 31, 1993

TO: Anne Luke, Executive Director,
Central Regina Early Learning Centre

RE: **SECOND QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT OF THE PROGRAM EVALUATION**

This report will give an overview of the program evaluation in the first three months of 1993. Building on the Research carried out in the Fall, I have continued to collect information on all aspects of the Early Learning Centre program. The guiding theoretical framework continues to be socio-cultural; from this perspective the efforts of the Early Learning Centre to help disadvantaged pre-schoolers focuses on the child as a member of different overlapping communities. In keeping with this, I have devised a simple model to organize and present some of the key points in the information which has been collected.

Graphically the model may be depicted as four concentric circles revolving around the child; starting from the centre these represent: the classroom, the Early Learning Centre's program (including outreach, transportation, etc.), parents and home, and the wider community. (See Appendix A). Following this model, this report will be presented under four main headings:

I LIFE IN THE CLASSROOMS

II PROGRAM AND ORGANIZATION OF THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

III OUTREACH TO PARENTS AND FAMILIES

IV THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE AND THE COMMUNITY

-2-

I

LIFE IN THE CLASSROOMS

In this section, I will summarize my observations and initiatives which revolve around the children's experience in the classroom; specifically this section focuses on the environment and experiences the teachers create for children during the four days each week which they spend at the Early Learning Centre. The following are the key areas of my "classroom investigations".

Curriculum

Through discussion, formal and informal, I have established that the teaching and administration staff definitely consider a written curriculum useful. They see a curriculum primarily as a tool or a plan: a type of flexible itinerary which maps out the route in advance but allows for deviations on the days "when nothing runs according to plan" or for when "the children have their days".

I am attaching a copy of the questions that I used to stimulate group discussion on curriculum (see Appendix B). There seemed to be general agreement that this group discussion helped to clarify notions about the curriculum. All teachers also agreed to complete their books of "Themes" (and resources).

Based on my knowledge of the history of Early Childhood Education and curriculum, I have devised a questionnaire for staff which will help me more exactly identify the philosophy underlying the Early Learning Centre's curriculum. My observations in the classroom will help me understand how Teachers' beliefs about

children and learning are put into practice. I have also begun to evaluate the Early Learning Centre curriculum in terms of the list of criteria for Developmentally Appropriate Practice for 3-5 year-olds published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1987).

Native curriculum content is another topic on which I continue to gather information. All staff seem to genuinely want to incorporate more native content into the curriculum but many are uncertain about how to do it; since the Early Learning Centre is not exclusively for Natives, some want the focus to be multi-cultural. Based on my discussions with staff, interviews with parents, advice from experienced outsiders and reading, I will present information for discussion with the teachers in September 1993.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Need for Another Adult in the Classroom

At the end of the Fall '92 semester the teachers felt a need to have more help in the classroom to assist them in coping with children going through a period of emotional upset; the need for a resource person was also discussed. This "floating person" would spend time in each of the four classrooms and would have special skills in helping with emotional and language development.

At present, the teachers no longer perceive the need for a third adult in the classroom. Having the drivers come in to help with dressing children at home time seems to have reduced the teachers' stress. As a result of discussions and observations I

feel the following suggestions may help to reduce stress:

1. Increase teacher knowledge and skill.

2. Have regular group discussions (perhaps once a month) of the classroom situation.

3. Where possible work out solutions so that as many as possible can contribute. For instance, the administration of the Brigance (mentioned as a 'source of frustration') could be discussed by all staff to find a solution.

Usually however, the teachers seem to derive great satisfaction from their work in the classroom and readily list the aspects of their work that give them pleasure.

Observation of Children

Since mid-March observations are being made of two 3 year olds in each classroom. These observations will continue throughout this school year and next. A detailed record is being kept of how each child spends his/her day; this record is supplemented by video-taping of each child.

As these records are over a period of time, they will help to demonstrate how children benefit from attending the Early Learning Centre. (Their impact will be weakened somewhat because of lack of a control group). But their main benefit, I feel, is staff development: to help teachers carry out and interpret observations. Since the teachers asked for help, at present the observations and video-taping is being done by one of my former students. If possible, however, future observations should be carried out by the teachers. (I will help them and discuss practical considerations for example, having a substitute come in).

Although not planned as such these observations of children are also acting as a record of the curriculum in practice.

Reporting to Parents and Record Keeping

I am working with the teachers to design a new report card. The results will, we hope, give parents information about their child's development; as well as communicate something of the goals of learning at the Early Learning Centre.

Strictly speaking, this activity is probably beyond the limits of the present evaluation; however, it gives me an opportunity to gain further insights into teacher beliefs and to carry out some staff development.

Teacher Skill Development

One of the salient features of the Early Learning Centre is the on-going emphasis on the development of teacher skill. Since the beginning of the present school year teachers have had workshops on a variety of topics, for example, child abuse and story telling. This semester also as a part of the implementation phase of this project, I have conducted the following workshops with the teachers:

1. Clarification of the Aims and Objectives of the Early Learning Centre.
2. Encouraging Language Development through Imaginative Play.
3. Introducing Functional Literacy Informally.
4. Early Development of Writing and Drawing.

Other workshops tentatively planned for the future are:

1. Helping pre-schoolers Plan.

2. Family Outreach and Involving Parents.

3. Native Styles of Interaction.

4. Native Curriculum Content: Theory and Practical Ideas.

Workshop topics are chosen because of a request from the teacher or as a result of my observations.

II

PROGRAM AND ORGANIZATION OF THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

This section will include discussion of all aspects of the Early Learning Centre's program outside of the children's experience in the classroom. Topics such as the adminstration, transportation and nutrition programs, fundraising, level of salaries will be analyzed as distinctive features of the overall program.

Administration

In the December 1992 report, I discussed some very positive aspects of the administration. Here, I will refer to some further observations.

Crisis management occupies a large proportion of the administrators' time and emotional energy. It is also very disruptive of plans to become more involved in program initiative in the classroom or with parents.

Child abuse is one such crisis that must be dealt with immediately. Because of the government policy (designed to safeguard children), reporting a suspected incidence can lead to a

breakdown of the parents' trust in the school. I will discuss these issues further with staff.

Team Evaluation

These evaluations are useful even when the communication between the teacher and the associate is open and effective. They help team members to put their concerns into words and keeps the director in touch with how the staff are thinking. Regular team meetings are crucial when team members are experiencing "Role ambiguity".

Orientation Program

The teachers and the three staff who were involved in piloting the orientation program gave very positive feedback. Some aspects of the program which the new teacher found especially helpful were: "Helped me to get to know the teachers and the children" and "gave me time for reading and reflection". Some minor changes were suggested.

This program was adapted to familiarize the new driver with the job expectations at the Early Learning Centre.

Working Climate at the Early Learning Centre

The spirit of the Early Learning Centre is pervasive; it struck me on my first visit in June, 1992. As I spend more time there, I understand more clearly why this is so: people who work at the Early Learning Centre feel part of a team and also that they are doing something worthwhile. The expectations example and enthusiasm of the administration is also a major contributing factor.

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Native staff feel very much at ease at the Early Learning Centre; they have never felt any discrimination or difference in treatment. However, some can understand why other native staff who left may have felt discriminated against: because of past experiences where they have been discriminated against and hurt, they are over-sensitive and misinterpret the behavior of co-workers.

Future Plans Re: Program and Administration

Interviews will be carried out with the drivers, the cook, the accountant, as well as with volunteers to gain more insights into the workings of the program. Information is also being collected on fundraising.

An important question also being investigated is, "can the Early Learning Centre survive the departure of its dynamic and charismatic founder?" My tentative answer is "yes" because it is a well established program; however, I am not sure that similarly talented people would work for such a low salary in addition to the burden of fund-raising.

III

OUTREACH TO PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Working with parents for the well-being of their children is one of the main goals outlined by the Early Learning Centre. A significant proportion of teacher time is set aside for family outreach. This section will discuss issues related to family involvement.

Home Visits on Fridays

Teachers have visited the homes of the majority of the children. All find these visits profitable and one spoke of how much she enjoyed them and wished that she could visit the homes every week. At first some parents were uneasy and thought that they were being "checked out" by the teachers. This unease passes as rapport is established, however, I got a few hints that some native parents may feel more at ease when being visited by native teachers. This is probably so only with more traditional native families.

Some advice from native teachers on how to act when first visiting a more traditional home may help; Carol Ledoux could act as a resource person also. Also I have been able to verify some aspects of Native interaction, for example, the importance of silence and wait time, and humor. These ideas have been verified by Carol and others.

Open Days in the Classrooms

So far this semester on Fridays two rooms held open days. Both were well attended, Transportation was provided and parents could bring along younger children and family members. The children had prepared for the visit by cooking food the previous day; parents were also able to watch a video of their children.

Phoning parents to talk to them and to make arrangements is probably another reason for the high attendance. All parents who attended were contacted by phone which points to the importance of establishing relationships with parents if they are to become involved. Several reminder letters were also sent.

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Programs for Parents

A well-attended workshop on parenting was held; twenty-four adults watched videos of the 1-2-3 Magic parenting program, participated in a discussion led by Kathy Willerth (Child and Youth) and ate a lunch of soup and bannock. Providing lunch was the idea of Carol Ledoux and was based on her experience organizing events on reserves. This event required considerable organization and was probably successful for the following reasons:

- transportation, baby-sitting and lunch provided
- adults given an opportunity to sit in small groups and to relax and socialize over lunch
- parents want to learn hints on how to discipline

Planning for Mini - Mosaic

To supplement the family involvement provided by the Fun Day, a "mini-mosaic" is being planned for June. Plans will be discussed with staff. This event provides for social interaction among families and staff, and will provide parents and care givers with an opportunity to participate if they wish.

The genesis of this event exemplifies some of the uncertainty about what the right mix of native and non-native content should be in the Early Learning Centre program. The original idea for the "mosaic" was an Early Learning Centre pow-wow; this was changed to a multi-cultural event because of unease among native staff members. Some reasons for this unease are:

1. The Early Learning Centre is not only for natives.
2. Non-natives should not feel left out.
3. Because of traditional values, many natives do not want to put themselves first.

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Parent Interviews

Carol Ledoux has interviewed sixty-eight of the present parents and foster parents. It was not possible to arrange visits to all homes because of lack of phone, etc. There have also been several (22) recent enrolments; for the present, these will not be visited.

Feedback from the parents about program continues to be positive. The majority of parent (including non-natives) would like to have some native content included in the curriculum. The main suggestions given were: videos of pow wows, native story telling and handi-crafts.

In addition to eliciting the parent's opinions about the Early Learning Centre, information is also being collected regarding their expectations for their children's education and future, family pastimes and their involvement in their children's education. Carol has started to analyze and quantify this data.

Follow-Up on Past Students

Carol has managed to contact twenty-five past parents. To do this she has used a variety of tactics as most of the telephone numbers and addresses have changed. In her own words, "The moccasin telegraph is beginning to work". She has interviewed the parents of two pre-school graduates who will graduate from high school in June '93. She is also trying to contact a graduate who attended university for a semester and then returned to her reserve.

-12-

Future Plans Re: Outreach to Families

In the months ahead, I plan to work with staff to help them develop a clearer set of objectives for parental involvement. Broad yearly outlines for the use of Fridays will also be drawn up. A list of teacher ideas for parental involvement will be made, as well as an inventory of parents and family members who are willing to participate in the classrooms.

A review of the literature on parental involvement and family outreach will be carried out.

Demographic data on the families attending the Early Learning Centre will be compiled and compared to the recent data published on the state of Regina's children.

IV

THE EARLY LEARNING CENTRE AND THE COMMUNITY

Notions of community are elusive and difficult to pin down so what follows is an attempt to define community in relation to the Early Learning Centre. I have tentatively identified four levels of community that affect the life of the Early Learning Centre:

1. The most immediate community is the one(s) with which the parents and families identify.

2. Although overlapping with the above, Regina's native community is also seen as another distinct group to which the Early Learning Centre must relate.

3. The wider Regina community is also important, because it offers support to the Early Learning Centre.

4. By stretching the notion of community, we can also examine the support that exists for programs such as the Early Learning Centre at various levels of governments.

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Community and the Families

Since the Early Learning Centre does not serve the needs of children of a geographically defined community within the city, identifying its immediate community becomes more difficult. Analyzing some of the information gathered by Carol may help us to understand the communities the parents identify with. I will also carry out some in-depth (informal) interviews with selected parents. A discussion with members of the Board may also help to clarify this question.

Regina's Native Community

Although the Early Learning Centre was not set up exclusively for Native children, due to economic realities it will continue to serve the needs of Native children for the foreseeable future. Some of the informal objectives of this evaluation, I feel, are to help the Early Learning Centre clarify its relationship with the Native community. The following is a summary of some of my findings:

1. The Early Learning Centre has always tried to respect Native culture and values and to make Native parents and children feel comfortable.

2. The Early Learning Centre does not wish to teach Native children their culture; rather it wishes to help children become familiar with native stories, art and artifacts and to teach respect and tolerance for all cultures.

3. Native people, because of their individual backgrounds and religious beliefs have an extremely wide range of views on matters like curriculum content.

4. The Early Learning Centre staff should examine their past efforts to include Native content and values in their classroom; see what worked well and build on that.

5. Natives, staff and parents, feel a great sense of loss and guilt about losing so much of their culture.

6. Many Natives have experienced discrimination and as a result approach institutions such as the Early Learning Centre with a certain amount of trepidation.

Regina and the Early Learning Centre

The Early Learning Centre receives some financial support from the City of Regina. Because of the present economic situation it is unlikely that additional support (financial) will be made available. To verify this I will interview members of the school board, city council and chamber of commerce.

To balance the official apathy however the Early Learning Centre has the support of a committed group of volunteers. I will make an attempt to enumerate their contributions, especially the time that they donate to the Early Learning Centre.

The place of the Early Learning Centre in relation to other service agencies is also being investigated by Carol; she is interviewing staff of other agencies who provide services for children who attend the Early Learning Centre. The Early Learning Centre has some contact with these agencies as they often refer children; however, there is very little contact with groups who offer early educational opportunities similar to those offered by the Early Learning Centre. Other groups setting up projects do not actively seek to learn from the fifteen-year experience of the Early Learning Centre.

At the provincial or national level no network exists to co-ordinate the efforts of various groups setting up pre-schools for disadvantaged children. I have been in touch with Maureen Sheehan,

site co-ordinator for the Better Beginnings, Better Futures project in Ontario who also complains of a lack of such a network to pool ideas. Perhaps we need to seek funding to set up this network because from my initial inquiries the Early Learning Centre seems to be one of the most established and longest running pre-schools for disadvantaged children. Perhaps we can start such an initiative with groups in Ontario? However, these suggestions are for after the end of this evaluation.

V

CONCLUSION

I would like this report to act as a basis for discussion, to help map out future directions for the present evaluation. Yourself, Esther, the teachers and the other staff may be able to pinpoint some areas of concern which I have missed. In this quarterly report, I have also attempted to draw up an outline for the final document: following this outline it will start with a general introduction to the history of the Early Learning Centre as well as reference to some previous research findings on the benefits of pre-schools; then the results of my investigation will be presented under four headings starting with the classroom and ending with the community; the report will close with a set of recommendations for final directions.

I look forward to discussing the information presented in this report as well as my plans with you. At this stage, the outline for the report are only general guidelines and as a result of discussion and further research may change to better represent the work of the Early Learning Centre.

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Thanks for your patience in reading this. It is long but I want to present you with an aerial view of the project.

Sincerely,

Mary Cronin, Ph. D.

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 28, 1993

TO: Anne Luke, Executive Director
Central Regina Early Learning Centre

FROM: Mary Cronin

RE: **THIRD QUARTERLY PROGRESS REPORT OF THE PROGRAM EVALUATION**

This is the final report of the program evaluation for the 1992-93 school year. Since in the March memo I outlined the scope of the investigation as well as a framework in which to carry it out, I will simply list some of the highlights of the new information that Carol and I have gathered recently. In this report, I will also indicate my plans for the "vision building" which will begin in earnest in September with the staff and both past- and present-parents.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE RECENT EVALUATION

1. Real efforts have been made to change the curriculum and teaching styles in two of the classrooms. These teachers are very proud of their efforts to be bolder in the projects that they carried out with the children.

Through these changes, they have also gained a deeper understanding of how children approach different tasks and of how to spark children's imagination and curiosity. Next school year, the teachers concerned want to start more and deeper discussions about curriculum issues with all the teachers and assistants contributing. One of the teachers making these discoveries for herself said, "Now for the first time, I think I understand 'child-centred'".

2. This past semester the teachers became more confident in their efforts to get parents and family to come to the school. Well-attended open days were held in each of the classrooms.

Parents seemed to attend once they had established a relationship with a teacher; this was done through home visits and phone calls to parents (unfortunately not all have phones). Because children are bused to school, teachers miss the opportunity to establish rapport with parents when the children are dropped off at school.

I have also collected a file of information about family outreach programs elsewhere in the United States and Canada.

3. Carol continues to collect information on our past students. To date, she has contacted fifty past students and interviewed either the student or their parents; where permission was granted she also interviewed the past-students' present teachers. This has been slow work as very few addresses or phone numbers are the same; many have moved back to the reserves and we have not been very successful in getting permission to carry out interviews there.

Carol also organized the very enjoyable "Mini Mosaic". A group of Aboriginal drummers played as a dance troupe gave a display of different styles of Native dance. This was a successful attempt at a multi-cultural event because, as far as possible, correct procedures for a Native ceremony were observed; in addition there were displays representing the six different ethnic backgrounds of the teachers.

4. I have gained a fuller understanding of the importance of the transportation program: I have established a rapport with each of the four drivers and travelled with them on their routes. The drivers are conscious of the fact that they form a vital link between home and school. They know each of the children and their home circumstances and address each by name. In many ways they extend the curriculum beyond the classroom in how they relate to and discipline the children.

Busing the children also has implication for curriculum; some children are on the buses for 45 minutes before they arrive at school. Because of this and inclement winter weather the Early Learning Centre should see if it is possible to use another one of the rooms upstairs as a mini-gym so that every day the children have some physical activity.

5. A special highlight of the past three months was the week that I spent visiting and participating in a seminar on the municipal pre-schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. I found the experience very inspirational and I have collected lots of information both printed and on video tape. At present, I am organizing the data that I collected and I am attempting to spell out the underlying principles of the citywide 0-6 years pre-school program.

Although nothing of what I learned can be translated directly to the Early Learning Centre, I will use the beliefs and philosophy of the Reggio schools as a mirror and a source of inspiration for our "vision building". This process has already started informally in discussions with the teachers. They seemed genuinely excited by the bold ideas of the Reggio teachers and impressed by the beautiful school and the organizational scheme that has allowed these ideas to become reality for young children. I also showed the teachers clips of my unedited videos.

I am joining the material given by the city of Reggio Emilia on their municipal pre-schools; this has been translated (at times a bit too literally) from Italian but you will get a general idea of the organization and parental involvement. The city has a population of 130,000 and spends 12.5% of its budget on pre-school education.

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6. Through discussions with Velma, I have gained a clearer understanding of how the Early Learning Centre has been funded over the past eight years. In particular, we have discussed fund-raising activities which have been carried out by the staff. The Early Learning Centre could not operate without these efforts and yet when the staff's time and energy is subtracted from the money collected the gains drop substantially. Fund-raising is felt to be a constant worry and annoyance, yet it does serve also as a P.R.O. exercise. This, however, cannot be put forward as an excuse for underfunding the program.

I have appended a copy of an article from the latest issue of Phi Delta Kappan which shows that money spent on high quality pre-schools is a wise investment.

7. Cross-cultural communication is an issue I have observed and gained an ever deepening understanding of since I started work at the Early Learning Centre. I have stated in my earlier reports that I believe the Centre provides a very welcoming, open, understanding climate for Native people to work in. <u>I still believe this</u>. Despite this, recently I have had some further indications from Native staff that "their voices need to be heard more."

The "problems" seem to stem from different communication styles (body-language, use of silence and timing). I want to stress that amongst the Early Learning Centre's Staff there is definitely no intentional discrimination or desire to perceive other people in racial categories. Perhaps these "problems" could be dealt in one of our planned cross-cultural workshops in the Fall. I also have some suggestions on how communication and sharing of responsibilities could become open more in the teaching teams.

PLANS FOR VISION BUILDING

With the exception of one week in July and another in August, I will work over the summer to analyze and compile some of the data that has been collected so that it can be used as a basis to develop future directions for the Early Learning Centre. In the Fall, this information will be presented to the teachers, parents and community groups to collect feedback to formulate an image of what the Early Learning Centre might be or could be in the future.

This process of "vision building" has already started with the teachers; we have discussed classroom observations and record-keeping and decided on a course of action which will be tried out in September. Native curriculum content, as well as changes to teaching styles has also been discussed, in addition, plans for increased parental involvement have been investigated. These issues will be explored further at the end of August, 1993.

All of the data collected by Carol Ledoux will be presented to parents, both past and present. Every effort will be made to have as many parents as possible attend all planning events.

Although I am uncertain of the response, I intend to ask the Board of Directors what action we can take to demand schooling for pre-schoolers as the <u>right</u> of every child from a low-income family. In Reggio Emilia, every child has the right to a quality pre-school education not as a substitute for mothering but as his or her right as a citizen.

CONCLUSION

Although some information has been obtained by interview and questionnaire most of it has been gathered by informal means (ethnographic and action research); this has involved a lot of participant observation or simply "being there" in as many

situations as possible. In a nut shell, action research means collecting ideas from the participants and then presenting them with these ideas so that they have to critically examine them. I intent to pursue the same methods in the Fall when more of an emphasis will placed on "vision building" for the future.

In conclusion, I would like to confirm that the Early Learning Centre is doing a very good job in educating low-income pre-schoolers; without any doubt it falls into the category of "high quality pre-schools". At this stage in my investigation, I am convinced that any of my criticisms or suggestions for improvement are simply to help to make it a very high quality or exemplary program.

I am looking forward to working with you and all the staff during the second year of this project. Thank you all for your open and frank attitude to my questioning (or as some might say snooping).

Enjoy your vacation.

Sincerely,

Mary Cronin

DATE: September 13, 1993

TO: Anne Luke, Executive Director
Central Regina Early Learning Centre

FROM: Mary Cronin

RE: FOURTH QUARTERLY PROGRESS OF THE PROGRAM EVALUATION

This report will give you an account of what happened over the summer months and highlight how my plans for the Fall are taking shape. I would like to remind you that although in this report, I will not give an account of the general work of evaluating all aspects of the program, this work never ceases and progresses quietly but steadily. For example, during the June and August reflection and planning days, I observed and documented the teachers level of awareness and knowledge; I have also recorded the progress (yes, there is remarkable progress) in cross-cultural relations among staff.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EVALUATION

1. In July, Carol Ledoux and I compiled the data collected by her in interviews with parents, past-parents and past-students. In general, all of this data is very positive, many many people praise the Early Learning Centre for its work; among the past students that she talked to, there was only one school drop-out. A minority of parents had suggestions for improvements and one felt strongly that because of the percentage of children of Aboriginal ancestry that there should be more native staff.

   Before I write up the data, collected by Carol I would like to interview some more past parents; if you are aware of any key past-parents who have been missed in the interviews, please let me know. Through discussion, Carol also helped me to deepen my knowledge of Aboriginal styles of interaction; before she left to take up graduate studies, she wrote a short paper on native styles of interaction.

2. Over the summer, I have made informal contact with several people in the broader Regina community to talk about the work and reputation of the Early Learning Centre: their spontaneous comments are unhesitatingly positive. I spoke to Barbara Young, a superintendent with the Regina School Board; we will meet again next month to discuss preschooling more formally. With Rosanne Glass of Saskatchewan Education I discussed the provinces plans for setting up two pilot preschools for disadvantaged children in La Loche and Prince Albert; she also sent me a copy of the department's terms of reference and the background paper for their preschool initiatives.

Over the holidays, I also had a few informal but informative chats with some of the teachers. They made suggestions about how to improve inter-team communication: I will discuss these with you eventhough I notice that this communication is already beginning to happen among staff. This may be for two reasons: (i) this year there are no new staff and everyone feels comfortable and less shy; and (ii) staff are making a greater effort to structure their time so that they have more time for discussion.

3. In the last report, I told you about my visit to the preschools of Reggio Emilia in Italy; when I spoke to the teachers about some of the philosophy and practices of those schools, they were enthusiastic and as a result of discussions the teachers and I decided to try out some of the key notions. Since last week this exciting project is underway: thanks to money that I have in a research fund at the university I have hired an Arts Education student, Shelagh Molloy, who will co-ordinate the work of the teachers. Shelagh's duties will be to:

   (i) act as a resource person and a catalyst of ideas for the teachers

   (ii) co-ordinate and work on some of the visual displays for the school hallways.

   (ii) work with small groups of children to carry out projects involving three-dimensional representation.

   Shelagh met with the staff for a two-hour meeting where she told them about the resource people in the community that she has already contacted; one of these is Lily Daniels the school's elder, (Lily will lend costumes and dolls for display.) We (the teachers, Shelagh and I) have already decided on three broad themes for the displays; these will also be the focus of the children's representations. These themes are: Our School (displays representing the history of the school, photos of past and present staff, etc); Our City (the people who live in our city, buildings, monuments, parks, etc.); and Our World (explorations of nature, the seasons, sand, water, etc.). Shelagh will help teachers to encourage the children, especially those who are more mature, to express what they hear, see and feel in as many symbolical languages as possible - drawing, clay, mime, dance, etc.

   Concrete plans to start collecting photos and children's work will be made when Shelagh and I meet with the staff over lunch hour this week. We will also decide on the placement of display panels in the entrance halls. In the meantime, teachers agreed to observe their classes and at the noon hour meeting to share ideas on the type of projects that might be successful with their classes; ideas about involving parents and other volunteers will also be shared.

I do not exaggerate when I call this an exciting project: already I feel that it has created an intellectual climate for the teachers which transcends the everyday problems they have to cope with. It will create a visual personality and active memory for the school; the displays will also help to document and communicate what happens at the preschool. Finally, I know that the children will benefit from being in a more aesthetic environment and from being stimulated to explore various forms of expression.

4. Before the summer holidays, plans were already underway for "vision building" with parents (past and present) and with the community. More definite plans for this are now underway: these efforts will be co-ordinated by Ivan Fleury, a mature student in Social work and a former member of the school's board. (Ivan will do this work as part of his practicum in Social Work).

Ivan will contact past and present parents and encourage them to come to an evening of discussion focusing on the future of the Early Learning Centre. He will also arrange for the venue (either the Friendship Centre or the Circle Project) and may act as master of ceremonies for the evening. The evening will begin with soup and bannock.

I will need your help to finalize the questions that will be used to focus the discussion about the school's role and mission; the staff will also be able to contribute to the formulation of these questions which will be distributed on the night following supper. Ivan and I will meet with you to agree on a tentative date and procedure.

In addition, to enticing parents and members of the Early Learning Centre's community to attend our vision building evening, I am also confident that Ivan will incidently gather general community perceptions of the program. Furthermore, the organization of this event should act as an exercise in developing support within the immediate community served by the Early Learning Centre.

CONCLUSION

In the year that I have spent at the Early Learning Centre, I have seen some aspects of the program grow and gain more structure; a good example of this growth is the family outreach program. Now the teachers are more confident and seem to feel more in control: already I have seen that some of the new parents have spent time in the classrooms working longside their children.

The program evaluation, I feel, is progressing well. Right now in addition to trying to find time to read and begin the report writing, I am searching out objective measures for the different program components. This I am doing so as to avoid

the evaluation appearing as a testimonial. I am also beginning to set limits to the scope of the investigation and data gathering. In order to cope with the problem of the unwildly nature of the task, I propose two solutions:

(i) to meet with you and reach an agreement about the scope of the evaluation; and

(ii) to hire a research assistant who is able to assist me in compiling the information.

You can let me know what you think about these proposals.

I hope that this report makes clear the new developments in the evaluation and program development. Thank you once again for making me feel so welcome at the Early Learning Centre. I look forward to meeting with you shortly.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Cronin Ph. D.

P.S. When I meet with you perhaps you will also be able to help me think of ways to gather, the teachers perceptions of the new initiatives in program development.

Date: December 3, 1993

To: Anne Luke, Executive Director, Central Regina Early Learning Centre

From: Mary Cronin

Re.: Fifth Quarterly Progress Report of the Program Evaluation.

This report will provide you with the highlights of my work in program evaluation and development over tbe past three months; in addition, it will outline my plans for the coming months.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EVALUATION

1

On 24 November, a gathering of past and present parents was held at the Native Friendship Centre. All in all, this "vision-building" evening was very successful: we estimate that about 100 people attended. This, for many of us, was a wonderful relief because organizing this event was truly a "shot-in-the-dark": in spite of numerous phone calls, notices in public places, letters and announcements in the media, we were never certain that more than a dozen people would attend.

I am appending a copy of the program and the four questions that were distributed to the participants. Over forty completed questionnaires were returned; these completed questionnaires do not represent the number of people whose opinions are represented because many family groups only filled one form between them. Some of the answers represented the opinions of past students--seven of whom attended.

At present, Mary Ann McGrath and I are compiling and summarizing this information: in the meantime, here some trends that seem to be emerging:

(a). Parents are very pleased with the support and help that they get or got from the Early Learning Centre (ELC): several mentioned that it is a very friendly place where their children are valued. They also appreciate what the children learn there; for example, social skills and school readiness (ABCs and colors, etc.)

(b.) In answer to the second question, "What would you like children to learn at the Early Learning Centre?" Many spontaneously responded that they would like their children to learn their culture and language. Also in answer to this question, the parents seemed to indicate that they themselves would also appreciate help in learning and in keeping up their culture.

(c.) Overwhelmingly, the parents responded that the ELC should remain as one large centre as it is now; however,

many responded that other centres should also be opened in other parts of the city to reduce the waiting list.
(d.) Many indicated that they would like help with parenting: specifically, several mentioned that they would like help with street-proofing their children and with explaining difficult ideas such as "death".
(e.) The majority felt that the community could help them to bring up their children by providing some after-school programs and facilities to keep the children off the street and prevent them from being bored.

When these data are analysed, I feel that an interesting and useful follow-up would be to have a group of parents or the Board of Directors explore these questions and responses in depth. I will discusss this possibility with you.

2

Another highlight of the work carried out this Fall was the all-day workshop for teachers which I arranged for November 3rd; this gave me an opportunity to follow-up on last year's investigation of the goals and curriculum of the ELC. The day had several aims; the most important being: (a) To give the teachers an opportunity to hear you (Anne) spell out your philosophy and reasons for starting the Centre. (b) To help the teachers reflect on how they feel they are carrying out these aspirations in the classrooms. (c) To give the teachers some feedback on what I had observed in their classrooms. (d) To plan to give special attention to

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some areas of classroom work, e.g., helping the children plan, and talking to and following the lead of children. As a result of discussion of the latter point, the teachers requested some help with children planning their own work and following the lead of children in conversations. These points also seem to be central to the philosopy of the ELC.

All of the teachers told me that they found the day inspirational; they especially enjoyed your talk and it gave them an opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice.

3

During the first week in October, I had an opportunity to visit the High/Scope Preschool in Ypsilanti Michigan: this is the flagship school for the cognitively-oriented preschool that has become very well-known in recent years because of its research base, long-term effects and cost-effectiveness. Results of the most recent investigations show that the benefits gained by preschool participants are still maintained at age 27 years. Following my visit to High/Scope, I visited three of the Ontario Government's *Better Beginning: Better Futures* projects. From these community-based projects, I learned about the importance of using ideas that come from local poeple; I also learned many hints on how to build community participation from the bottom up.

4

As planned, I talked to some community leaders (including the mayor and members of the school board) about

the urgent need for the Regina community to take care of the well-being of the next generation of Reginans. This I argued should be done because of the right of all children to have a fair chance in "the race of life" as well as for the politically more expedient reason of the cost effectiveness of preventative measures.

The Mayor, Doug Archer, was very sympathetic and stated that he would contact me within the next six weeks about his plans for preschoolers; he also praised highly the work of the ELC.

I interviewed psychologists and social workers from The City Child and Youth Services who refer children to the Centre. They also hold the ELC in high esteem and feel that its work needs to be publicized more to set an example of what could be dome to help children and families in poverty cope in spite of their unfair circumstances.

5

Being invited to run a workshop (see brochure attached) and having an opportunity to attend the Provincial Mental Health Conference opened new perspectives on preschooling: it was treated as a very important mental health issue. Dr. Dan Offord's keynote address was particularly relevant to the work of the ELC. In addition, attending this conference gave me the opportunity to make contact with professionals in the field of mental health.

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6

I have pointed out what I consider to be recent highlights of the evaluation, however, the general observation and evaluation of the program proceeds daily; some points of note in this on-going work are: (a) Shelagh Molloy's work with the teachers in decorating the hallways; (b) documention of how the Executive Director of the Centre spends a typical day--dividing her time between coping with minor crises, routine administration, fund raising and public relations, visiting the classrooms, etc.; (c) preparation by Mary Ann McGrath of a profile of the children who attend the ELC and the preparation of a comparasion of this to the information in *The State of Regina's Children*; (d) detailed full-day observations in all classrooms; and (e) discussuins with Velma, the school's accountant, on funding.

CONCLUSION

In addition to some plans which I outlined above, I also have plans to make a video of the work of the ELC. This video will supplement the written report and will be available to all those interested in the work of the Centre as well as to the parents and the community. I will discuss my plans with you and the teachers as soon as possible so that we can begin production.

In January and February 1994, I will be in Europe visiting educational institutions. (This is part of my university work but it should also lead to new insights in the present evaluatiion.) Since September 1993, I have worked full-time in order to make up for the time that I will miss in the New Year. During my absence, Mary Ann McGrath will oversee the evaluation.

Once again,I would like to thank you and the staff for your cooperation and openness in every aspect of the evaluation.

Sincerely,

Mary Cronin

APPENDIX 4:
TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS

All teachers must have a teaching certificate or a Bachelor of Education degree, preferably with classes and/or experience in Early Childhood Education. At present, all teachers working at the Centre fulfill these requirements. The job description for teachers lists the following *critical factors* of the teacher's role:

- Must have an understanding of a child-centred approach to learning.
- Must have sound knowledge of the importance of play in early learning.
- Must know how to engage children in play.
- Must have knowledge of and ability to organize classroom in learning centres.
- Must like children.
- Must have ability to appreciate other worldviews.
- Must be flexible.
- Must have strong interpersonal and communication skills.
- Must be able to establish an harmonious and egalitarian working relationship with the associate teacher.

APPENDIX 5:
EXAMPLES OF THEME PLANNING
Animals in Winter

MUSIC CENTRE

Make rattles with margarine containers and various natural materials (e.g., feathers, seeds, stones, twigs)

Quiet, winter music for animal's hibernation (e.g., passages from Vaughn William's *Antarctica)*

SCIENCE CENTRE/ WRITING CENTRE

Mount and hang pages from Jan Thornhill's *Wildlife ABC.*

Put out vocabulary cards for kids to use on typewriter or computer.

DRAMATIC PLAY CENTRE

Make scarves, bunting bags, blankets etc. available in playhouse.

LANGUAGE AND LISTENING CENTRE

Set up the tape recorder with tape and book *Wildlife ABC.*

Tapes of a teacher telling Cree legends.

ART CENTRE

Make stamps of animal footprints with pictures of the animal on top. Children can make prints of animal tracks.

Leave out materials for kids to collage animals in winter. Display on mural.

ART CENTRE

Put up pictures of different animals in winter (e.g. turtle hibernating, Geese migrating). (Random House, *Who Lives Here* has good pictures)

Make a matching game of animals and their tracks

Lay out tactile displays (e.g., feathers, horns, fur)

Weigh snow and ice

PAINT CENTRE

Use brown, black, and white paint. Leave out feathers for kids to paint with.

PUPPET CENTRE

Canadian Wildlife puppets.

BOOK CENTRE

The Mitten, Jan Brett
The Magic Glove, Jane Yolen
The Little Crooked Christmas Tree, Trish Tusa
Snow On A Bear's Nose, Bartoll
Annie and the Wild Animals, Jan Brett
Where They Go In Winter, Marg Buck
Animal Tracks, George Mason
Northern Alphabet, Ted Harrison
Keepers of the Earth

LARGE MOTOR CENTRE

Turn climbing frame into a forest or tree

With a blanket turn slide into a bear cave.

Kids can dramatize the different animals getting ready for winter. (Kinds can wear cloaks). Mount mural (art centre) on wall behind this area.

CARPENTRY CENTRE

Display pictures of different types of bird and animal feeders. Leave out materials for children to make their own feeders. Later these could be hung outside classroom windows. Hang up some binoculars for kids to check on their feeders.

FLANNEL BOARD CENTRE

Felt animal characters for *The Mitten.*

FINE MOTOR CENTRE

Make a squirrel tree with various snaps, buttons, ties etc. For kids to manipulate.

NUMBER CENTRE

Make a counting game with cylinder trees and walnut.

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EXAMPLE OF THEME BUILDING

Theme
Animals in Winter

Purpose
To help children understand how Canadian wildlife deal with winter.

Objectives
The children will learn that all Canadian birds and animals need to get ready for winter; some migrate, some hibernate, and others adapt. The children can become more aware of the signs of wildlife around us.

Introduction
Introduce the theme by reading Jan Thornhill's *Wildlife ABC*. Use a Canada Goose puppet as a "Friend."

Centres

1. STORY/LANGUAGE	SKILLS & CONCEPTS
A. PUPPETS: Set up puppet centre with paper bag puppets of Canadian birds Use wolf puppet for starting storytime	Language development Vocabulary building Acting out animal roles
B. BOOKS: Put out three bear version and other bear books from previous week Add new books about animal/birds in winter Also bring in some Junior informational books	Book handling knowledge Concepts about print
C. FLANNEL BOARD: Make up Flannel board characters along with a real mitten for the children to retell the Ukrainian folktale "The Mitten"	Concept of story Language development Vocabulary development
D. LISTENING: Set up a tape recorder and headphones with a tape recording of Jan Thornhill's *The Wildlife ABC* and include the book	Listening Literacy skills Language development
2. HOUSEKEEPING	**SKILLS & CONCEPTS**
Use large blocks from blocks centre to set up a winter environment (e.g. a frozen pond) Incorporate this together with the gym centre into one area	Cooperation & creative thinking Role playing and pantomime Knowledge of wildlife habitats
3. SAND/WATER	**SKILLS & CONCEPTS**
Add a set of Canadian birds and animals to the sand box. Let kids use pinecones, twigs, and rocks to represent trees, mountains and caves. A clear plastic dish can be used for a frozen pond. Put snow in the water table.	Play using representational objects Knowledge of animals' environments and habitats Vocabulary development — properties of snow
4. SCIENCE	**SKILLS & CONCEPTS**
Put up pictures of Canadian birds and and animals in winter Lay out tactile displays such as antlers, feathers, thin and thick fur, etc.	Understanding of what animals and birds do to get ready for winter Awareness of wildlife signs around us
5. ARTS & CRAFTS (PAINTING)	**SKILLS & CONCEPTS**
Use inner-tube rubber and wooden blocks to make stamps of wildlife tracks. Glue animal/bird picture on top of stamp. Make a winter landscape mural. Set out different materials for kids to collage animals and birds. These can be put on a mural.	Printmaking Awareness of distinctions in wildlife tracks Creativity, cooperation fine-motor and tactile

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6. FINE MOTOR/COGNITIVE	SKILLS & CONCEPTS
Leave out animal and related puzzles Set out materials (feathers, twigs, stones,etc.) to sort, match and count Decorate cylinders as trees labeled with a certain number of squirrels. Kids can store walnuts to correspond with the number of squirrels. Make a material tree which children must put together with snaps, buttons, zippers, etc. (you can also add small stuffed animals which live in trees). Provide materials to make certain objects (e.g., animals) that are related to work being done in class	Fine motor Sorting, matching, counting
7. CARPENTRY & CONSTRUCTION CENTRE	**SKILLS & CONCEPTS**
Hang up pictures of various wildlife feeders. Supply materials and tools for kids to build their own feeders. Hang them outside. Supply binoculars and seeds, etc., for children to maintain their feeders.	Fine and large motor Empathy Care for animals and birds
8. GROSS MOTOR	**SKILLS & CONCEPTS**
A. BLOCKS: Add props like trees, animals and pine cones to this area.	
B. CLIMBING FRAME: Set out blankets and large pieces of cardboard. Kids can brainstorm setting up a forest in the climbing frame and a cave with the circle slide. Extra blankets (small) can be set out for kids to use when acting out animal characters. Children's wildlife mural can be put up behind this area.	Dramatizing Language Development Co-operation Empathy for animals
9. MUSIC	**SKILLS & CONCEPTS**
Make available tapes of quiet music to accompany hibernating animals available. Children can act out animals sleeping, waking up and moving very slowly.	Auditory discrimination of mood music Experimentation, imagination
ALSO	
FIELD TRIPS: Near the beginning of the week take children on a nature walk through Wascana Park looking for signs of wildlife. Visit the bird sanctuary to feed the geese. Visit the Royal Saskatchewan Museum. Cooking experience: Making bird feeders and seed cookies from Early Learning Centre Cookbook. **VISITORS:** Traditional story teller to tell seasonal legends. Royal Saskatchewan Museum has people who can do hands-on demonstrations with kids. **RESOURCES AVAILABLE: (BOOKS, PICTURES, FILMS, VIDEOS, ETC.)** Set up display of animal puppets with Cree word labels. *A.T.H. Dialect Cree Picture Dictionary* Kitisakit School Students *Let the Children Learn: A Culturally Relevant Handbook for Teachers in Band Controlled Nursery/Kindergarten Programs.* Saskatoon District Tribal Council	
VOCABULARY LIST: Names of Canadian animals and birds hibernate, migrate, adapt, fly, build, collect, hunt, gather burrow, hollow, cave, tree, dam, den, nest, underground tunnel, dig, sleep, store, breathe, fat, white, brown winter, warm, cold, fur, thick, feathers, antlers	

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APPENDIX 6:
POLICIES AND PROCEDURES OF TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM

CHILDREN'S ARRIVAL & DEPARTURE PROCEDURES

Arrival

1. A designated staff person will meet the vans outside to assist in supervising entrance to the school.
2. Children are met at the door by their teacher, remove their boots and go to their lockers.
3. Drivers advise each teacher if any children are missing, and reason for absence if known.
4. Drivers note names of absentees in the Record Book.
5. Staff also mark attendance on a hallway chart outside the classroom.

Departure

1. Children are taken from each classroom to their vans by both teachers, one leading and one following.
2. Staff assist to ensure safety of children boarding the vans.
3. Drivers must be informed of any changes which may have occurred during school hours. The number of children leaving must correspond with the drivers' amended list.

POLICY ON LEAVING CHILDREN WITH A DESIGNATED ADULT

Children can be returned only to the home of the parent or in an emergency to the home of a responsible adult previously designated by the parent. Failing that, as a last resort, Mobile Crisis Services will be contacted.

Procedures

1. In the event that a responsible adult is not at the child's home, the driver notifies the school.
2. The driver then returns remaining children to their homes and makes a second check at the child's home. In the meantime, Early Learning Centre staff will try to locate the designated adult. If, within a reasonable time, no responsible person can be found, Mobile Crisis Services will be contacted.

WINTER DRIVING POLICY

The safety of the children is considered first and foremost when making decisions regarding driving in winter weather.

1. If the temperature is -30° Celsius or colder, the school is automatically closed.
2. In the event of severe wind chill factor, ice fog, or hazardous road conditions, an individual decision will be made regarding cancellation of transportation services. In this case, parents will be notified by their driver by phone. If they so desire, parents may choose to bring their children to school and pick them up at the regular time.
3. In the event the vans are running but are very late for any reason, the school will attempt to notify parents by phone.

EXCURSION GUIDELINES

1. All field trips must be approved by the Director or designate before they are booked.

2. All new field trip locations must be assessed by the Director or designate for safety hazards, etc., before a trip can be approved.
3. Arrangements for transportation are made with the drivers (24-hour notice) and confirmed by the Director or designate.
4. Arrangements by the Director or designate must be made to ensure that transportation is available in case of an emergency.
5. At least 24 hours in advance of a planned excursion, a notice is sent to parents and includes:
   - location of trip
   - time of departure and return
6. A ratio of 1 adult per 5 children is maintained at all times. These ratios will be supplemented with either extra staff or other adults for higher-risk excursions to swimming pools, beaches, etc.
7. All children remain under the direct supervision of their teachers at all times, and regular safety checks are made.
8. On walks and when crossing streets, there must be a staff person at the front and rear of the children to ensure their maximum safety.
9. A designated staff person maintains a list of all children on the excursion.
10. Some form of child identification is mandatory. Centre name, address and telephone number should be identified on each child.
11. Children should be prepared for the excursion with the necessary information.
12. Staff should ensure each child is properly dressed as the outing requires.
13. At no time are volunteers, students or parents assigned sole responsibility for the children.
14. On occasions where both staff and parents are present, the staff person continues to assume responsibility for the child/children.
15. Staff/volunteers carry some form of identification.
16. First-aid supplies are to be taken on field trips (including quarters for the telephone and emergency information for each child).
17. Swimming: When children are swimming anywhere other than a shallow wading pool, a lifeguard is present, lower ratios are implemented, frequent attendance checks are made and flotation devices are available. Children are not allowed to play in water over their heads unless they can swim one length of the pool. When trained lifeguards are not available, staff will have a procedure to follow. This procedure will include supplementary safety measures to ensure the safety of the children.

APPENDIX 7:
CLASSROOM OBSERVATION CHECKLISTS

These checklists were created by Mary Cronin to help teachers observe the children's progress in four areas of development: language, cognitive, socio-emotional and literacy. The teachers also keep records on other areas such as fine and gross motor development. The report card used by the Centre was revised in May 1993 to reflect the information collected throughout these observations.

OBSERVATION LIST — SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ability To Follow Routine

- Understanding the sequence of the day
- Ability to finish tasks
- Coping with transitions
- Helping to tidy up
- Acting as a "helper"
- Distractibility
- Hyperactivity
- Ability to delay gratification

Social Interaction With Other Children

- Ability to share toys, etc.
- Ability to take turns
- Respect for what others are doing (opposite: aggressiveness)
- Frustrated by other children working in the same area
- Ability to show remorse
- Ability to form relationships with other children

Social Interaction With Teacher

- Ability to form a relationship
- Ability to follow orders
- Ability to ask for help or clarification

General Social Development

- Ability to understand that certain behaviours such as lying and stealing are not acceptable
- Showing consideration or gratitude
- Ability to understand the outcome of their actions vs. impulsive behaviour
- Displays of "challenging behaviour" (usually as a sign of frustration or an inability to communicate verbally)

OBSERVATION LIST — COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Ability To Self-Regulate

- Ability to plan activities (short & long term)

- Ability to order events in memory
- Ability to attend to a story, task, etc. (length of attention span)
- Ability to express a preference and act on that preference
- Tolerance of frustration

Ability To Reason

- Ability to hold a conversation
- Ability to predict consequences of stories, own actions, experimentation, play, etc.
- Ability to use past experience to solve a problem or to do something
- Ability to generalize ("This is like _____")

Curiosity And Awareness

- Asking questions, especially "why" questions
- Making connections, e.g., similarity of stories or activities
- Showing a consistent interest in finding out more about something

Play And Imagination

- Ability to play with sand, water, etc.
- Ability to play imaginatively with sand, water, etc.
- Ability to sustain imaginative play over a certain length of time
- Ability to play a role
- Ability to use imagination and "pretend" e.g., biting cookie so that it looks like a boat.

OBSERVATION LIST — LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Story

- Ability to listen to a story
- Ability to retell or talk about a story
- Ability to predict story parts

Writing

- Attempting to write name
- Pretend writing in any form
- Using writing or print in play
- Pretending that pieces of paper are notes, prescriptions, etc.

Environmental and Functional Print

- Awareness of print in the environment
- Awareness of function of labels, etc.
- Requests to have labels or names written
- Use of reading or writing on things in play or other activities

Books

- Knowledge of parts of books
- Book handling knowledge (page turning, etc.)
- Use of vocabulary to describe books and print (author, page, words, picture, etc.)
- Ability to choose a book

Reading-like Behaviour

- Ability to sit and "read" book
- Ability to "read" book with other children
- Ability to match their story to the pictures
- Ability to reproduce story read by teacher
- Ability to make connection with other stories or life.

OBSERVATION LIST — LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Receptive Language
Record sample of the type of language *understood* by the child. Generally understanding should result in a reply or an appropriate action.

Expressive Language
Development of:

- *Phonology:* Record sample of child's language. Note any speech sound the child is missing or having trouble with.
- *Syntax:* From recording of child's language transcribe the sentences — some of these may be only one-word sentences. Note sentence length and use of inflection.
- *Vocabulary:* Record a sample of words used by the child throughout the day.

Ability To Hold A Conversation

- Ability to take *turns* in a conversation with one or two others.
- Ability to sustain a conversation over *time*.
- Ability to use language to convey meaning rather than using gestures.
- Awareness of what the listener needs to be told.

Using Language For A Variety Of Purposes
The following uses of language have been adapted from Halliday (1975).

"I want": Instrumental language is used to satisfy needs or desires: the child uses "I want" language to express his choices, likes or needs.

"Do as I tell you": Regulatory language is used to control others by giving orders or commands to the teacher and others. It is also used to give instructions, e.g., care of pets.

"Me and you": Interactional language is used to establish and maintain relationships. This type of language is often used when children talk quietly at snack time, when they make cards or gifts for others, write notes to the teacher, etc.

"Here I come": Personal language is used to express opinions, feelings and individuality. In practice, this type of language is very close to interactional: the children are probably also

attempting to establish a relationship when they tell about their exploits, likes, and dislikes, new babies and parents.

"Tell me why": Heuristic language is used to explore and find out. This type of language focusses on asking questions, observations and keeping records, e.g., plants or school pets.

"Something to tell you": Informational language is used to convey information. In practice it goes together with heuristic language: the child finds something out by questioning and observation and then wants to tell about it. Activities related to this use of language are making bulletin boards and displays.

"Let's pretend": Imaginative language is used to create a world of one's own. This type of language is used in dress-up play, sometimes when playing with locks, sand, water, miniatures (farms, gas stations, etc.) or during book reading, story telling or puppetry.

APPENDIX 8:
GATHERING AT THE FRIENDSHIP CENTRE

THE
CENTRAL REGINA

EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

INVITES
ALL FORMER PARENTS
AND STAFF
TO A

GATHERING

Wed. Nov. 24
6:30 p.m.
at the FRIENDSHIP CENTRE
1440 SCARTH ST.
Soup and bannock will be served
FEATURING THE CROOKED LAKE SINGERS

We would like to see you, hear your opinion of our program and discuss together the future of the Centre.

Please call us for more information
757-3744

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) What should a good preschool program provide for children?

2) What would you like children to learn at the Early Learning Centre?

3) Should the Early Learning Centre be one big program as it is now, or would it be better to have smaller programs in different parts of the city?

4) Besides a preschool program, what other services would you like the community to provide for your children so that they can grow up healthy and happy individuals?